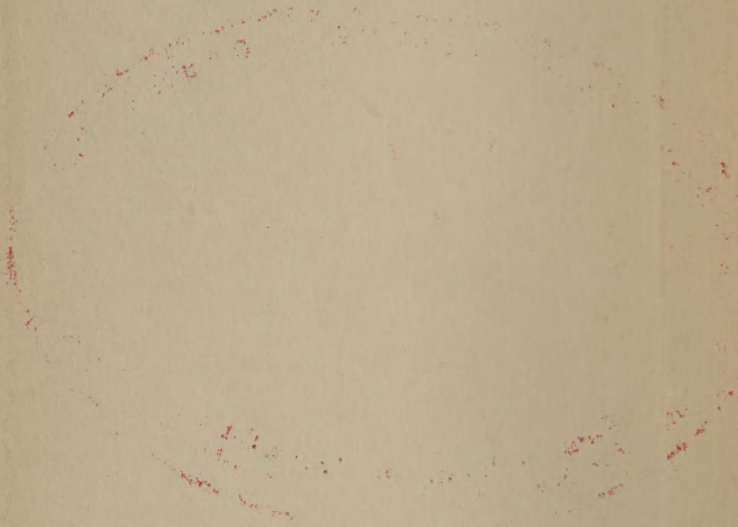
Children of Chance

ANTHONY CARLYLE



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CHILDREN OF CHANCE

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BY

ANTHONY CARLYLE

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"UNLAWFUL OCCASIONS," ETC.

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I

Binny Clay, drifting in the direction of Scarlossi's Theatre, pulled the high collar of her cheap coat closer about her neck and shivered.

She was out of a job. She was cold and tired. She was depressed, and she was hungry — very hungry indeed. A girl friend had, half an hour ago, given her a drink out of mistaken generosity. The effect was to emphasize the hollow feeling at her waist-line, and to inflame her sense of rebellion against Fate, and the world in general.

Halting abruptly outside Scarlossi's, rebellion became resentment. From half a dozen life-size photographs in imposing gilt frames the face of Lola Arnaut, London's new favourite of the footlights, smiled at her demurely, pensively, or provocatively. And to Binny Clay it was exactly as if she had paused to look at her own face in a mirror.

The likeness was extraordinary, uncanny.

Though for weeks now Binny had gazed upon it, as in a looking-glass, it never ceased to be amazing. The features were identical, the tilt of the chin, the moulding of head and cheek and throat, the full, curved bow of the mouth. Even the little ears, delicate and close-set, were the same.

Binny knew this through intimate searchings of her personal reflection in the cracked and murky mirror which adorned the shabby wall of her diminutive "fourth floor back." No one, passing now, and glancing from her to the portrait of Lola Arnaut, would have thought of making any comparison.

Binny, huddled in the folds of her shabby wrap coat, was an insignificant, somewhat bedraggled figure. Her shoulders were drooped, her hair escaped in wisps from beneath her close-fitting hat. Her lips were dry, her face was pinched. There were blue circles under her eyes, and the eyes themselves were unnaturally large.

But given the right clothes, warmth and food, a touch of rouge, and she would be transformed to the living, breathing image of the woman in the photograph.

As has been said, the fact that she was

Lola Arnaut's "double" was to Binny a constant source of interest and amazement. A year ago she might have found it utterly bewildering as well. A year ago she had not known the explanation of the likeness.

It had been whispered to her, haltingly, by a dying woman in one of the dirty back rooms of an evil-smelling tenement house. That same woman, illiterate, harsh of tongue, occasionally over-ready with a blow, had cared for Binny ever since the girl could remember.

At one time dresser to many theatrical people of note, circumstances, an undesirable husband, and a weakness for gin had brought her low. But she had shown an odd conscientiousness with regard to the upbringing of Binny. She had been somewhat astonishingly strict in her guardianship of the girl, if crude in her method of enlightening her as to the pitfalls, many and varied, which were likely to beset her path through life.

Remembering her now, Binny blinked. There had been a rough and undemonstrative affection existing between them. With the woman's death Binny had been left utterly alone. How alone only she herself knew!

Since "Mum" Jenkins's death, Binny had found life increasingly difficult. Though Mrs. Jenkins had masterfully decided upon a theatrical career for her, the girl had known only three engagements, and those in pantomime. And during the last year she had earned her living precariously, dancing or singing at third-rate cafés frequented chiefly by foreigners.

It was not a nice life. Binny detested it heartily. But it had provided earnings sufficient to pay for a roof of sorts and a limited quantity of bread and margarine per day. And now, since she had revolted violently against the attentions of her latest employer, she was without a job.

Her thoughts drifted back to Lola Arnaut, merged again hazily in a recollection of Mrs. Jenkins's deathbed confidences. She dwelt upon the scene, visualizing it in every detail: the bleak room, the candle guttering upon an upturned condensed milk tin, the sagging curtain drawn across the window on a piece of string, the looming shadows in one corner, and the unlovely face of the dying woman that looked out from them.

In those last moments Mrs. Jenkins's brain

and speech had been remarkably clear. She had said what she had to say briefly, without embellishment.

"You're not my kid. Perhaps you've guessed that already; it's plain, anyway, you're not my kind. But I've loved you same as if you were. Your mother was a chorus girl — and a lady. Most of 'em make out they're daughters of clergymen or officers, but your mother, she *was*. An' the stage was no place for her. You've got more talent than what she had, an' *that's* not sayin' much!"

Binny knew a flicker of amusement at the recollection of the compliment. It passed. The weak voice was ringing at the back of her mind again.

"But she was a lady, an' I liked her. She liked me, too, and treated me different to the rest. An' then a young swell fell in love with her and wanted her to marry him. He was a real swell, one of her own sort. Not rich, but with enough, an' prospec's, so she told me, abroad. They was awfully in love, the two of 'em — an' Mary, your mother, was dead sick of the life. She wanted to marry 'im an' go right into a new life with 'im. But there was you. She'd never even told me about you

before, though you was risin' six months. You must 'ave 'ad a father, of course. But I never set eyes on 'im, an' Mary she never mentioned 'im. She called herself Mary Munro on the stage, but your birth certificate was made out in the name of Clay."

The doors above her swung open and a couple of men ran down the steps in the streaming light. Binny watched them without interest, still absorbed in memories.

"You'll find it among my things. She left it with me when she went away. I've often wondered at her goin' — like that — an' you such a 'elpless wisp of a thing. But there! She was awful in love. An' the man an' his marrying 'er meant her whole chance of 'appiness. But she couldn't let 'im know about you, o' course. An' so I took you an' she went off. She used to send me money for you regular; then it stopped. I found out after she 'ad a baby an' died. I 'spose I could 'a' written to 'er 'usband — but I didn't. I liked Mary, I did — an' 'e loved her. Guess you'll understand, girl."

Binny had understood. There were tears in her eyes now. But behind the tears was a faint bitterness.

"That would be twenty-two years ago. The baby'd be a year an' six months younger'n you. I wouldn't 'ave told you anything about it, only it didn't seem hardly fair. Not seein' as how you're placed, me peggin' out an' all. See here, Binny? You've seen the papers? The fuss they're makin' about this new girl from New York? Lola Arnaut, she calls 'erself. Lord knows what they see in 'er, except that she's pretty. Livin' image of you, Binny, when you've washed extra an' got your 'air waved. Gave me quite a turn it did w'en I first saw 'er! But she 'asn't no talent an' no voice. You'd leave 'er at the ropes as far as *singin'* goes. But she's got a way of lookin' . . . an' I suppose some one's backin' 'er — an' there you are. Then yards of 'publicity' in all the papers — 'ow she's the daughter of real swells an' ran away to go on the stage. May be true, an' may be not. It don't matter much. What I'm gettin' at is that Mary Munro was 'er mother, same as she was *yours!* 'Tain't so wonderful Lola Arnaut's like you, seein' as she's your sister. It may come in 'andy for you to know that, Binny, some day when you're nearly down an' out!"

II

The doors swung wide again. A stream of people, talking and laughing, began to emerge from the theatre. Taxis came slurring, one after another, up to the kerb.

Binny shook herself hurriedly free of her reminiscent mood and backed away from the crowd. There was a singing in her ears and her eyes were over-bright. Quite suddenly she was conscious of a determination to see Lola Arnaut. After all, she was practically "down and out" as "Mum" Jenkins had expressed it, and if Lola knew of the tie that existed between them she might help her.

Binny drew a long breath. She was trembling, but her expression was set, her lips compressed. The courage of desperation was surging through her. She slid, eel-like, through the throng of people and down the side street into which the stage doors opened. In a short few minutes now Lola Arnaut would be coming out. Binny made up her mind to stop her, speak to her . . .

She sped on. Already round the stage door the usual crowd had gathered. Two or three cars were at the kerb, among them a small, dark, neat one in which, Binny knew, Lola invariably rode. This was not the first time she had hovered outside this particular stage door during the last few months. Only she never before had been desperate enough to do more than watch and envy. To-night was different. She had not felt as she felt to-night save once, when "Mum" Jenkins had forced her to drink nearly raw gin as a balm for raging toothache, and once when she had gone down with fever and had become light-headed.

She decided, vaguely, that the drink she had swallowed to-night was only just beginning to have effect. Certainly she was not herself. A strange mood of recklessness was growing upon her.

She drew her collar up close about her face, nearly concealing it, and took a place in the shadows opposite the dark, neat car. The interior was softly lighted. Binny caught a glimpse of Parma violets in a thin silver vase. A moment later she became aware of a man standing near. He wore a thick overcoat,

the collar pulled up to his ears, and a soft cap drawn low over his eyes.

He, too, was watching the stage door, and it struck Binny that there was something furtive in his manner. Once a shaft of light struck fully upon his face, revealing it clearly. It was thick-featured, dark, and rather brutal. She wondered idly whom he was waiting for, the while, at the back of her brain, "Mum" Jenkins's dying words hammered insistently.

"Lola Arnaut . . . your sister . . . It may come in 'andy for you to know that . . . some day when you're nearly down and out . . ."

There was a stir among the crowd. Binny noticed that the dark man had stepped swiftly off the kerb and was passing round at the back of the car. A moment later she saw him reach from the other side and the interior light went out.

Binny was still staring as Lola Arnaut, her fur wraps huddled about her, hurried through the drizzle of rain and reached the car. The chauffeur stretched a long arm back and opened the door, shutting it sharply upon her as she whisked in, and the car slid gently away up the street.

Binny stared after it. Dismay filled her soul. Then, upon an impulse which she could never afterwards understand, she began to run. Her dominant thought was that she must speak to Lola Arnaut to-night — to-night, while she was cold and hungry enough to cling to her courage.

The chauffeur was driving very slowly. He would have to turn off into yet another narrow side street. Binny ran more quickly, outpacing him, until she reached the curve of the pavement where the streets merged. Then she stepped into the road.

She looked back at the approaching car, meaning to signal to the man to stop. But he mistook her gesture, growled something as he swerved to avoid her, and darkness engulfed her as the headlights swept by. The next instant, with a gasp, she jumped for the wide footboard.

Giddy, scared, astonished at her own action, she clung frantically to the handle of the door. The window on her side was open. She heard Lola's voice, startled, angry, but very low:

"Gustav! What a fright you gave me . . . ." And then: "You have those jewels?"

Binny, urgently occupied with the task of keeping her position, listened with detachment.

A man's laugh — a singularly unprepossessing laugh — answered.

"I've got 'em all right! But you don't suppose I'm going to be such a goldarned fool as to part with them? Come, kid! Be sensible! You can try the hysterical stunt on young Farrance — tell him you've been robbed. He's in love enough to believe anything you like to say. It's easy money, girl!"

"I will not!" . . .

The car lurched; Binny, clinging desperately to her precarious perch, missed the next few sentences. Then: "Farrance is too decent to treat like that. He lent me the jewels to help me to make a show with Van Bevan. You know he'll never look at a girl who doesn't dress really well and look as if she'd some substantial backing . . . It's thanks to Farrance and the loan of those jewels that I'm going to sign that contract to-night at Delorme's. He'll be there as well as Van Bevan and the rest . . . I've got to give him back those jewels. They belong to the family — heirlooms. Young Farrance had no

right to let me have them. He'd get into a fearful trouble if his people knew of it . . . ."

Binny groaned. The car was increasing speed, and this certainly was not a propitious moment to make known her presence to its occupants. It seemed to her she had perched here for hours, though she knew it was bare minutes. From beyond the open window there came a rustle of paper. The man spoke.

"See here," he said—"did you mean all that you said in that letter you sent me to-night?"

Binny was conscious of a chill which was not entirely due to the sleety rain that beat through her thin coat. She was aware of an increasing and intense interest. She quite forgot the conversation was not meant for her ears, and listened eagerly for Lola's reply. It came after an imperceptible pause.

"I did. I can't help it, Gustav. I've been a fool where you're concerned and I've helped you in a good many crooked transactions. And I'd stick to it, I suppose. But if you don't give me back Farrance's jewels, I'm through. I'll tell you took them from me. I'll make your record known, so that you'll be utterly done. I'll ruin myself and damn my best chances, I know. But I happen to

respect young Farrance as well as care for him — a bit. And I'll do it! So now you know."

Binny endeavored, cautiously, to peer within, but the light was still out, the figures of the man and the woman indistinct. There ensued a moment of intense silence. The man's low voice broke it.

"Tell the driver the Embankment!" he commanded. "We've got to — square this."

Binny, intrigued, breathless, sensed that the actress hesitated. Then she heard her speaking into the tube:

"Up and down the Embankment, twice!" she ordered. She turned to murmur something to her companion, but the girl clinging to the door handle did not catch it.

The chauffeur swung the car round a corner and looked back as he did so. He caught sight of Binny.

"What in hell! — " he ejaculated. Binny burrowed deeper into her collar and gasped. Then came inspiration.

" 'Sallright!" she assured him. "Thought you were a taxi . . . Practising a 'movie' stunt, that's all! Go right ahead. I'll drop off in a minute."

The man stared, but obeyed, growling.

As they swung on to the dark Embankment, he slowed down and it was borne in upon Binny that she must abandon her intention of speaking to Lola, or else make known her presence without delay. Her ears were singing, and her fingers were growing cold. She tried, uncertainly, to come to a decision. From the interior of the car there came the sound of quick breathing, of movement, but no voices. Still undecided, Binny clung on while the car slid the length of the Embankment and turned. And still neither the man nor the woman within spoke.

With an effort Binny took her courage in both hands again. She had acted madly enough; she might as well carry the thing through. She leaned forward, thrusting her head in at the open window.

"Lola Arnaut!" she said.

But there came no answer. Puzzled, Binny leaned nearer, turning the handle. With something of difficulty she opened the door, squeezed in, and closed it again. She dropped onto the seat, breathing hard, and, as her eyes became accustomed to the dimness, she realized for the first time that the man was no longer in the car.

The woman sat in the opposite corner, sideways, her face hidden and resting against the padded side of the seat. Her furs had slipped off one shoulder. The white arm dangled limply at her side. Conscious of a sudden, heart-shaking apprehension, Binny got up.

"Lola!" she whispered again, and caught at the bare shoulder. Instantly the actress's body sagged forward, her head fell back, loosely, horribly. A passing light shone full upon her face. The eyes were wide and fixed. The mouth was distorted, swollen. Upon it was a fleck of blood and foam. Upon the slender throat the livid imprint of brutal fingers was already discoloring to a bruise.

Lola Arnaut was dead.

III

Binny had been brought up in the slums. She had seen death, sudden and otherwise, in many guises; and it had ceased greatly to shock her. She did not, therefore, scream now; but she sat down suddenly, feeling exceedingly sick. Momentarily she was numbed, physically and mentally. Her senses were rocking, her vision blurred. She put a chilly hand to her head.

"I'm dopey! . . ." she whispered. Then she shuddered. The light of a street lamp illumined the car. Lola's body had slipped to the floor. It was as if Binny looked upon her own upturned dead face. . . .

It shocked her from her stupor. Her mind cleared. Only the sensation of physical sickness remained. With one hand clenched tight against her mouth, she began rapidly to review the events of the last half-hour.

It was not difficult to hazard a guess at what had happened, in view of what little she had learned from the snatches of conversation

she had heard. Some one had loaned Lola valuable jewels. Those jewels had come, somehow, into the possession of a dark-eyed and unpleasant-featured person named "Gustav." He had refused to give them up. Obviously Lola had been associated with him on previous occasions in negotiations of a questionable, and possibly "crooked," character. She had known enough about him to be able to bring disaster upon him. This she had threatened to do. The result . . .

Binny looked down at the still face, and hastily away again, shuddering anew. She surmised that the brutal crime had not been wholly unpremeditated. She remembered that the man had hidden himself in the car to await Lola's coming. Under ordinary circumstances no one would ever have known he was with her to-night. And she had been so utterly unprepared for attack that she had not been able to utter a cry.

It was simple — horribly simple. Lola would be found dead, strangled, in her car. No one would dream of connecting this "Gustav" with her death. Farrance, whoever he might be, was expecting her, with the jewels, at Delorme's. She had, of course,

been seen wearing them, since they had been loaned to her for the purpose of impressing a new manager. What more plausible than that she had been followed, robbed, and killed . . .

And then, suddenly, in a flash, Binny saw what her own position might be if found here, with Lola's dead body, in the car. Sheer panic brought her to her feet, her face white. Then she dropped back again. The car was running very swiftly. She could not jump out now, unnoticed. In only a moment or two they would be in the brilliantly lighted street again . . . in only a moment or two the chauffeur would be asking for further orders. And he had seen her on the footboard . . .

She must do something, quickly, very quickly. She must have a little more time to think. She looked down. Lola was lying against her feet. In slipping to the ground the body had become entirely free of the huge, loose fur coat. It lay on the opposite seat. Binny's eye fell upon it, she reached out, touched it, drew a quivering breath. The next moment she caught it up, discarded her own coat and wrapped it round her. As she straightened herself, she caught sight of her

dim reflection in a small mirror opposite. With an effort she stifled a cry, then grew very still. In her agitation she had pulled her soft little hat off. With her hair pushed back off her forehead, in that wonderful fur coat she was no longer Binny Clay. She was the personification of Lola Arnaut.

And it was in that moment that the great idea leaped, flaming, in her brain. Holding the cloak about her, she knelt beside the dead woman. "Gustav's" face rose before her, a spasm of rage against him shook her—a queer, fierce longing for revenge. She wanted to make him pay for the dastardly thing that he had done . . . deep down in her heart she vowed that he *should* pay. She thought of the man named Farrance. And all the while she thought, the plan at the back of her mind was maturing — mad, fantastic, grotesque.

Very gently she wrapped her own shabby coat round the dead woman. Very carefully she pulled her cloth hat well down over the shining hair, right to the brows. Exerting all her strength, she raised the body, lifting it with an effort to the seat, propped it in the corner. With steady fingers she buttoned the high collar up about the mouth and chin.

Then, deliberately and violently, she pulled the check cord. As the car slowed she pushed the door open and leaned forward. The chauffeur was looking back. She met his eyes steadily, and nearly laughed aloud because in them there was no faintest flickering of suspicion or surprise — merely a wooden inquiry. She said, rather breathlessly:

"You paid to drive in your sleep? Here's a girl been hanging on to the door whimpering like a scared rabbit! Says she was doing it for the movies, and lost her nerve . . . Looks like having hysterics in a minute and wants to go back to Fulgarth Street! You'd better beat it back there — Whitechapel way, isn't it? — and forget the speed limit!"

Up to that moment her intention had been, at any cost, to get taken back to her home. Now it occurred to her that, arrived at Fulgarth Street, the chauffeur would quite naturally ask questions. Afterwards, even if he did not discover that the limp figure in the corner was that of a dead woman, he might talk.

She moistened dry lips with the tip of her tongue. Then she nearly laughed again. Chance, that had so strangely ruled to-night's

happenings, took a hand in the game again. The chauffeur was speaking protestingly, with an air of injury.

"It's late, miss! And Mr. Farrance said as 'ow I could go off duty the minute I'd dropped you at Delorme's. Got to get right down into Gloucester by morning, an' have to garage this car an' take the motor-bike. Bein' married, miss — Mr. Farrance couldn't let me off any sooner. But 'e promised . . ."

Surreptitiously Binny lifted a hand to her throat. A passing taxi caught her glance.

"Call that cab, then . . ." Her voice held command. She turned back into the car as the man obeyed. As he opened the door, she bent over the huddled figure, and her voice lifted, seemingly in exasperation. "Lord! She's *fainted* . . . Oh, well, lift her into the taxi, then, and, for Heaven's sake, be quick! No, no! Don't light up! If any one recognizes me, we'll have a crowd round . . . Here, wait a moment!"

She helped the man lift Lola, watched him, sick with fear, as he bundled her, without a glance at the sagging head, into the taxi. The voice of the taxi-driver rose protestingly, muttering something about not caring about

carrying "drunks," but Binny, cold to the heart of her, silenced him peremptorily and turned to the chauffeur.

"Cut along to Delorme's!" she told him breathlessly. "Tell Mr. Farrance I'm coming . . . No, no, don't wait. I'll get another cab!"

The chauffeur grunted, heaved himself into his seat and proceeded on his way. Binny, faint, and with trembling knees, stumbled into the taxi.

"Thirteen Fulgarth Street," she commanded, her face hidden in the collar. "And get a move on. My friend's sick."

The man opened his mouth, shut it, and after a moment's hesitation started the cab. At thirteen Fulgarth Street he stopped.

Binny tumbled out, thrust a ten-shilling note into his hand, and whispered: "Carry her up for me — quietly. Fourth floor. Don't want any one to hear — landlady prides herself she's extra respectable . . ."

The man grinned in the darkness, gave a shrug, and, reaching into the cab, hauled out the limp figure. Binny, shuddering, led the way up the dirty wooden stairs. Still in darkness they found her room — the taxi-driver

dumped his burden into the nearest chair and backed out.

Binny stood motionless until, far down in the street below, she heard the taxi start again and go throbbing on its way. Then, fiercely, she stifled a sob, locked the door, and tipped a chair-back under its handle.

. . . . . .

Half an hour later she emerged, silently, from the silent room. She wore Lola Arnaut's clothes, her jewelled watch, her rings. She carried her big silver chain purse. Stumbling down the stairs, she knew that never, in all her life, would she forget that half-hour. She felt like a ghoul — the touch of the scented clothes made her flesh creep. But her white lips were set grimly; in her unnaturally bright eyes was a feverish, unwavering resolution.

How long it was before she reached Delorme's little, rose-lit restaurant she did not know. Her pulses were throbbing and her blood hot as fire in her veins. She saw herself in the huge mirrors, and it was as if Lola Arnaut's ghost moved there.

A waiter hurried forward. Two men seated at a corner table rose quickly and came towards her. Interested glances followed her.

And she went her way like a woman in a dream. One of the men was young, clean-cut, with blue eyes that warmed her with their glance even at this moment. The other was short, fat, and benign of aspect.

The young man said her name, eagerly: "Lola!" His hands caught hers. "Why, you're ill — cold as ice . . . ." He put her into a chair.

For a moment she sat quite still. Then she laughed. "Oh, no! Only — horribly hungry!" she said. She met his amazed stare, and giggled helplessly. She knew that at that moment she was on the verge of hysterics. But the first mouthful of hot soup wrought a change. Halfway through the meal she had command of herself.

"Had a trying day!" she explained. "Not much time for meals." She looked vaguely from the benign man to the young one and smiled. "Where — where's Gustav?"

The little man waved his hands. "Our friend Gustav is *distrait* to-night . . . He was here but a moment since, much concerned at your delay, Miss Lola. He'll be back presently. Meantime here's the rough contract, for you to sign. Mr. Farrance will witness

it — and Gustav, when he returns. It will be put in proper order, in due course. And may we both have the best of luck when you're under my management, young lady!"

He pushed a paper towards her, and a fountain pen. Mechanically she took the latter, held it poised. She hesitated, laughed — then laid the pen to the paper. It was all a mad, big bluff. But for to-night, at least, she was the popular actress. The dead woman who would be found at thirteen Fulgarth Street was Binny Clay. With a flourish she signed: "Lola Arnaut!" and looked up into Farrance's face. "The wine's gone to my head!" she said. "I — I can't write straight! . . . ." And then paused.

Van Bevan was waving his wine-glass to a man who had just entered the room. Binny turned slowly. Her eyes smiled into Gustav's suddenly ashen face. Very slowly she held out a welcoming hand. Lola's jewels gleamed upon it, and as if impelled against his will Gustav came forward. His mouth was dry. There was terror and bewilderment in his eyes. Binny flourished the paper before him.

"I've signed the contract!" she declared gaily. "And now we're going to celebrate!

Mr. Van Bevan, go and find that waiter! I want some more champagne!"

As Van Bevan jumped up to obey and went across the room, Binny leaned across to Farrance. Gustav had dropped limply into a chair, still staring at her.

"Mr. Farrance," she said confidentially, but with a catch in her voice, "I'm more than obliged for those jewels. They've done the trick. Gustav has been looking after them for me. I want you to take them back now, before Mr. Van Bevan comes back! Gustav — please."

She smiled anew into the amazed malevolence of the man's dark eyes. Very slowly he put his hand into his pocket and drew forth a flat, wide case. Binny opened it, and with something very like a sob pushed it across the table to Farrance.

IV

For a little while after that Binny was not at all clear what was happening. She knew that Farrance was speaking to her; that Van Bevan had come back, beaming, a waiter following — that Gustav sat immovable, staring at her.

All these things she knew, yet she felt far away, like a person looking on at her own image playing a part. Just exactly what was going to happen next she did not know, and, at the moment, did not particularly care.

Up to the present she had been actuated solely by a fierce desire to revenge her sister — to bring her horrible, unnecessary, and cruel death to the door of the man who had murdered her — to see that the other man, Farrance, was not robbed. Lola had wished that. Whatever of wrong she had done during her intimacy with Gustav, whatever her shortcomings morally, she had meant — had fought —to act squarely by the man who had helped

her; who had, in all trust, given into her charge, for her adornment, jewels which, because of their history, were priceless.

For a little while it was as if the soul of Lola had entered into Binny. Utterly reckless, finding a grim, terrible humour in the situation, she had played her part. Now the strain was beginning to tell. She sagged in her chair, and Farrance, looking at her, broke off in the middle of a sentence and frowned.

"You're awfully done up!" he asserted boyishly. "You ought to go straight home, and to bed!"

Binny smiled at him vaguely. In a detached sort of way she decided that his eyes were awfully nice, his clean-cut young face very good to look upon. For a second time she was conscious of a glow of warmth. She blinked drowsily, becoming instantly aware that his frown deepened to disapproval and half-startled wonder. Unexpectedly she found his hand, long and fine, and sensitively strong, closing upon her wrist.

"You're not yourself, little girl!" he urged; and, with a jerk, Binny roused herself. From her other side the man Gustav laughed, shortly, unpleasantly, his dark eyes gleaming.

Immediately she was upon the defensive. She clutched frantically after her self-control, mustered anew her failing faculties. She had a game to play still — just what it might be she was not quite sure yet — but she meant to play it. She was still Lola Arnaut. She would continue to be Lola Arnaut for a little while longer.

She looked, searchingly, for suspicion in Farrance's eyes, superbly ignoring Gustav, and, finding only a still faintly flickering disapproval, coloured faintly, smiling up at him in deprecation.

"I'm not . . . not quite!" she agreed, with an audacity which surprised herself. "But, then, what girl could be — under the circumstances?"

Van Bevan, filling her glass, joined in her rather hysterical laugh. He exuded amiability, and she drank, gratefully, smiling at him. "Not one in a million!" he was assuring her. "Not one in a million, m'dear! You've the chance of a lifetime in that contract — the chance of a lifetime, and don't you forget it! If you've got it in you to make good — really good — something better an' deeper'n just the beauty stunt, you'll do it

under me! A chance in a lifetime, my girl — a chance in a lifetime! . . ."

He spoke somewhat truculently, and Binny sensed a threat, but he had dined well, and he waved his glass at her benevolently.

She responded in kind. "I know. I promise I'll work very hard — really!"

She smiled grimly, yet in the same moment her eyes grew intent A little breath fluttered and caught in her throat, the colour deepened to brilliant rose in her cheek. She remembered how she had envied Lola — had watched her, night after night, fascinated by her beauty, irritated in her own artist's soul by the lack of artistic power in the other girl. She remembered Mrs. Jenkins's words — they hummed insistently, almost as if spoken, at the back of her mind: "Lola Arnaut — she 'asn't no talent, an' no voice . . . you'd leave her at the ropes where singin's concerned . . . ."

She herself had talent, of a sort. She felt it, stirring in her, like a live thing. But, greater than this, she had a voice. Not a great voice, perhaps, but a good one. Untrained, ill-used, but a voice. Her throat swelled even now — she recollected how she

had sung Lola Arnaut's songs, over and over again, in the solitude of her one dingy, disheartening room, alilt and aglow with the melody.

She looked at Van Bevan over her glass with a new gleam of speculation in her eyes, her delicate lower lip caught between her teeth, her nostrils ever so slightly dilated. She hardly knew what thoughts were forming at the back of her mind, but once more she had a grip of herself, the mists had faded from about her, her brain was clear, alert. Slowly it was being borne in upon her that there was something really remarkable in Farrance's and Van Bevan's unquestioning acceptance of her in her rôle of Lola Arnaut. What Gustav was thinking, she could not guess. She did not try to.

Surreptitiously, sideways, she glanced at herself in one of the many mirrors; and, imperceptibly, she shivered. It seemed impossible that it could be herself — Binny Clay, of dreary, dingy Fulgarth Street — reflected there. After all, the fact that these men believed her to be the other girl might be remarkable, but it was easy to understand. With Lola's clothes she seemed to have

assumed the other woman's characteristics and mannerisms. Watching Lola from her humble perch in the gallery, not once but many times, particularly of late, Binny had unconsciously learned her little tricks of movement, of facial expression. Only half consciously now, born mimic that she undoubtedly was, she was employing those tricks, subtly, wonderfully.

She was living, actually, the part she was playing. In her present mood, her abnormal condition of mind, she *was* Lola Arnaut . . . the living, breathing personification of a dead woman. She knew it, intuitively. Knew it because of the way Farrance and Van Bevan spoke to her; knew it more surely because of the look of fear and real horror that still lingered in Gustav's eyes.

She glowed with a curious triumph, naïvely proud of herself for "getting away" so brilliantly with an impersonation which one would have thought impossible. But, until this moment, beyond to-night's ending, she had not thought. She had been prepared to play the part of Cinderella in conventional fashion, if with a difference. Throughout she had acted like a person just a little mad. Her

object had been to terrify, utterly, the man who was her sister's murderer, and then, dramatically, to denounce him.

She had signed the Van Bevan contract in a spirit of hysterical excitement and sheer bravado; for the same reason she had continued her impersonation of Lola long after it was necessary. But now . . . she drew a long, deep breath. She looked down into her glass, and up into Van Bevan's red, jolly face; and then down again at Farrance's long, fine fingers that were still resting upon her wrist. New ideas, new desires assailed her. She began to tremble a little, her eyes dilating. A voice that urged, while it mocked, seemed to be at her ear: Binny Clay! Binny Clay! Binny Clay was lying, very still, in a dirty top room in Fulgarth Street . . . *and Binny Clay was dead!*

V

"I NEVER knew you were so fearfully thin before, Lola!" Young Farrance's voice cut sharply across that other whispering, insistent, persistent one, and Binny looked up at him with a startled gasp.

Suddenly, painfully, she was aware of bare shoulders that showed unnatural hollows, for all their grace; of arms too sharp at the elbows, so small at the wrists that they might have been a child's. The colour flamed in her cheeks and died again. She essayed a laugh, and choked on it.

Farrance's hand tightened, masterfully, upon her wrist. "You're feverish, too!" he declared. "Your hand's like fire . . . . I don't believe you're well!"

Binny laughed again, somewhat shakily. "I don't believe I am. Been — been working like the dickens, you know . . . and in our profession there's no time to get fat. Not until you're at the top of the bill, anyway! . . . And I'm *not*, by a jugful!"

Was it Binny Clay who was speaking? Or

had the soul of Lola failed to die with her body, and come whispering, haunting, to dwell side by side with that of her sister? Binny shivered, staring fascinated at the bubbles in her glass. But she went on, steadily, even lightly: "I'm *not,* and you know it!" She checked Van Bevan's hasty protest with a determined hand. She was looking straight ahead of her, visualizing Lola as she had seen her, read about her, heard of her from various sources. She had gauged the other girl's limitations with shrewd accuracy. She had known that her beauty had taken her where she was; she had known, too, that she could go no further. Lola Arnaut must have "fallen down" on the Van Bevan contract. Farrance's influence, perhaps, and Farrance's jewels, had won it for her. But she must have failed. Binny knew; and, knowing, spoke as Lola should have spoken, but, most assuredly, would not have done.

"*You* know it! And *I* know it! I — I've — so far — been just a passing fancy of the public. I've held them 'cos I'm — more than merely pretty! It — as you said just now — has been just a sort of 'beauty stunt.'" She looked up slowly, without quite knowing why,

and met, instead of Van Bevan's, Farrance's steady gaze. A little flicker of colour touched her cheeks. There was an odd, deep glow in her own eyes. "All the same, I've got more in me than just that — I think. I — I shall be quite a different person if — when — I come under your management, Mr. Van Bevan."

Van Bevan looked at her quickly, opened his lips, and closed them again. Farrance's gaze, deeply puzzled, oddly pleased, continued to hold hers.

She smiled at him, suddenly — and again without knowing why. "I *do* want to make good!" she asserted, and there was a childish, eager catch in her voice.

Farrance released her wrist and sat back in his chair. He was more completely perplexed than he had ever been in his life. The girl he believed to be Lola Arnaut was showing him a new side of her character; he was beginning to suspect depths hitherto unprobed. He sensed a change in her inexplicable as it was intriguing. So far he had never attempted, seriously, to analyse his feeling for Lola Arnaut. Like a score of other young men of his own kind, more or less idlers, and decidedly more than less moths

about the footlights, he had met her, and had subsequently believed himself to be in love with her. Perhaps she had selected him for greater favour than the others because she had realized, instinctively, that he was wholly dependable, clean-minded, clean of heart, and dead straight.

Dudley Farrance was a man any woman might have welcomed as a friend, not necessarily as a lover. There was something boyish about him, something fresh, and fine, and wholesome. If his appetite for gaiety and beauty was keen, it was not a jaded appetite. In Lola Arnaut he had found a creature of subtle allure, a queer, irresistible charm. She was not usual; nor was her beauty usual. If it had been, she could not have "starred" without a shred of real talent to support her. She had interested him. In some way he could not define, she had made a strangely pathetic appeal to his chivalry. She had never seemed quite happy; never quite sure of the future.

Because of this, he had wanted to help her. Because of this, and because, intuitively, he had disliked and mistrusted Gustav De Mille, whom he regarded as a distinctly undesirable

intimate of Lola's, he had shown a reckless disregard of good sense and worldly wisdom by loaning her jewels that were priceless by reason, at any rate, of their associations, so that she might make a "hit" with Van Bevan. It was not without relief that he felt the case snug and safe in his pocket now. And it was by no means in his customary frame of mind concerning her that he sat regarding her now. He was frankly puzzled. But not for one moment was the suspicion borne in upon him that this girl was not the real Lola; he was simply conscious of a new rising of warmth within him for her, a revival of his first eager admiration for her, this time with some subtle difference at its root which, for the life of him, he could not define.

The Lola of yesterday had stood, confessed, a butterfly, desiring to rank among the stars without working for her place, content to depend upon her beauty for her popularity. The Lola of to-night had different aspirations. He knew it, instinctively and with certainty, and wondered afresh. Her assurance to Van Bevan that she wanted success, and meant to work for it, had rung true. Farrance glanced at the latter. He was staring at the girl,

his lips pursed, in his eyes something of that speculation which had showed in hers not many moments previously.

Across the table Gustav De Mille laughed — suddenly, sharply, sardonically. If his glance at Binny was furtive and fearful, it was also malicious. Nor was she unaware of it, and while the breath choked in her throat she gritted her teeth fiercely in a growing determination to combat the difficulties in her path and to conquer them. Farrance sent De Mille a glance of distaste; Binny did not even turn her head.

Van Bevan chuckled. "That being so," he observed, "let's talk business for a moment right now!"

Binny flung him an apprehensive glance. Farrance, increasingly aware of her weariness, exclaimed protestingly; but Van Bevan went on, speaking earnestly, leaning with his elbows on the table and cupping his three chins comfortably in his palms.

"In that contract," he announced — "as you know — you've bound yourself to play through the run of the new show I'm putting on. It's not goin' to be so easy, by a long shot, m'dear, as the stuff you've been putting

over up to now. In fact — as perhaps you guessed — I hesitated over makin' that contract quite a bit!" He paused.

Binny looked up and down again. Her hands were tightly locked, her lips compressed.

Van Bevan proceeded. "I decided for it, in the end, because you're still being talked about as a looker. More than an ordinary looker, at that. And I wondered, maybe, if there mightn't be a bit of something in you worth stirring up — something more than just bein' a beauty. That's all you are at present, Lola, you know. Every bit all!"

Farrance, flushing a little, made a quick gesture.

Van Bevan caught his glance, and added hastily: "No offence meant, m'dear! We're all friends here — with your interests at heart — or I wouldn't be talking this way. And you yourself brought up the subject of hard work and success, you know!" He spread out his plump hands, nodding ponderously. "You'll have to do a mighty lot of the first if you ever hope to bite off even a small chunk of the second! You're a beauty all right, all right! I'm the first" — he bowed gallantly — "to admit it. But beauty ain't what makes

a really successful actress, m'dear — and don't you forget it! It's a draw for a bit — but not forever, not by a long chalk! You've about six months, more or less, to run on the beauty tack . . . but that's all!" He nodded again, his little eyes shrewd, but not unkindly. "I'm giving you the straight goods, Lola. I've made this contract with you because you'll be worth what I'm paying you for six months — even, maybe, for half the run of the show. You'll have a chance to show if you can work — and if it's worth your while working! But I tell you, frankly, I'm not bringin' you forward like I would if you could *do* anything! Lord knows, I wish you could!" He sighed suddenly, and heavily.

Once more Binny opened her lips, once more closed them. She was, as she herself would have expressed it, sitting tight, and absorbing from his conversation a great deal of information.

Farrance, observing her, was struck anew by the rather strained intensity of her expression, an earnestness beneath the deepening brightness of her eyes, and checked, without quite knowing why, an impulse to end Van Bevan's discourse.

The latter added, a shade dismally: "I wish you could, Lola! I'm needing somebody who can do something. We go into rehearsal Monday, and the second lead's fallen out ill! Pneumonia! Little Lottie Carrall, you know . . . Poor kid! Nothing over-much to look at, but a way with her — somethin' quaint — not quite usual. Ivo Dallas has written her songs, and he's gone all out in the new show. Giving us some really good stuff. You know his style — whimsical — fantastical — rather delicate. Not a girl in a dozen could get away with it really successfully, and not one out of a shop that *I* know of who wouldn't make a howling mess of it. Ivo's 'Daisies' was typical . . ."

"Daisies!" Binny looked up sharply. The song in question was one of extreme popularity, an airy nothing, which had been murdered alike by many of the performers who had aspired to it, and by the public at large. Impulsively, half contemptuously, scarcely realizing what she was doing, she began to hum the first few bars. Farrance sat upright and Van Bevan ceased to stare despondently at the empty champagne bottle. Binny's voice, subdued, yet clearly sweet, trilled up

softly over the lilting lines. . . . It ceased abruptly as she met the astonished eyes bent upon her, and she grew hot, then cold. She laughed, shakily, yet with a certain triumphant challenge.

She made a quick movement to rise. "I guess," she observed, "the champagne — and the contract — have gone to my head! .·. .·. .·. I'm sorry!"

"You needn't be!" Van Bevan rose, too, after a glance about at the hovering waiters and almost deserted dining-room. He spoke grimly, with shrewd eyes upon the flushed face of the girl. "I'm beginning to think, young woman, that you've been hiding your light under a bushel! I'd like to hear you sing 'Daisies' — with an accompaniment." He glanced for a moment thoughtfully at Gustav De Mille's dark profile, and added: "With Ivo Dallas's accompaniment. . . . How about cuttin' across to his flat now? Won't be taking you out of your way, since yours is in the next block .·. .·. .·. C'm along!"

"Good Heavens! *No!*" Binny's protest was desperate, scared. As she uttered it, she met Gustav De Mille's mocking eyes, and

flushed, stopped, caught unsteady hands up against her throat.

Van Bevan laid a firm hand upon her arm. "Come along!" he commanded again, and now his voice held authority.

Binny, after one despairing glance at the decidedly disapproving Farrance, obeyed like a woman in a dream. Where Ivo Dallas's flat — or that which was supposed to be her own — might be, she did not know. She did not know even after she had arrived in it, and found herself greeting a small, middle-aged man with protruding dark eyes, a sensitive mouth, and a forehead over which a thick lock of hair hung lankly.

She gathered, dazedly, that he was Ivo Dallas. As dazedly she shook hands with him — knew that he was regarding her with a sort of intolerant scorn that rather nettled her — and found herself being propelled towards a piano by Van Bevan.

"Daisies!" Dallas's voice came to her as from a great distance. "My dear Van Bevan — I know any one can — er — sing 'Daisies,' but, surely, it's not Miss Arnaut's type . . . ?"

In the background Gustav De Mille laughed. The sound, as before, made Binny

shiver. But it brought her back to her surroundings, made her grit her teeth savagely. Her throat went up. Her eyes snapped.

"Never know what you can do till you try!" she asserted flippantly. "Mr. Van Bevan's got a hunch I've not been giving Scarlossi all I'm capable of . . . seems to fancy . . ." She broke off.

Ivo Dallas, at the piano, had presented an uninterested back, and was striking the first chords of the song. Binny's voice caught up with them — broke — and rose suddenly, clear, unwavering.

Thereafter "Daisies" was sung as it had not been sung since Lottie Carrall had made of it the most popular song of the year. Binny danced the second refrain. Her cheeks were brilliantly flushed, her eyes blazing. She danced as she had danced before her cracked mirror — dreaming dreams. And she came back to earth at Van Bevan's roar.

"Suffering cats! What in thunder has been the big idea, anyway — kiddin' the lot of us you hadn't a note in your throat? . . . An' *dance!* . . . Ivo, what about it? Am I drunk, or can she sing — and *can* she dance?"

"Can she not?" Ivo retorted with brevity. He pulled a loose score from the top of the piano and handed it to the girl. "Try that — run through the words and then improvise a dance. Ready?"

The score shook in Binny's hands, but her eyes were clear. She hummed the words falteringly, uncertainly, the music appealing, yet strange in her ears. But with the dance she found her poise anew. At the end of it she swayed. Farrance, catching her arm, steadied her.

Van Bevan lumbered heavily to his feet. He looked dazed. "If you can keep that sort of thing up — you've got a career before you, young woman — and I've got a new find!"

Ivo, running his fingers through his hair, regarded her with a new respect. But she was only aware of the grip of Farrance's hand, and the burning malevolence of Gustav De Mille's eyes.

Farrance drew her towards the door. "You've had just about enough!" he commented rather grimly. "We'll see you across to your own flat right away . . . unless you others are going to stay here?"

"I am!" Van Bevan declared. "Got a

whole heap to talk over with Ivo, here . . . what about you, De Mille?"

"Going with Lola!"

It was the first time Binny had heard him speak, and she looked at him quickly. She nodded vaguely to Ivo and Van Bevan; then she was in the street. In the vestibule of the opposite block of flats to Dallas's, she hesitated, then, with another catch of her breath and a little grim smile, heard Farrance ask for her key. She hardly understood at first, then, distastefully, fumbled in the bag she carried — Lola's bag. A key was there. Farrance took it, opened the door, and stood aside.

"We'll say 'good-night'!" he said. "Congratulations will wait till to-morrow!"

Again Binny hesitated, then she stepped across the threshold. The flat was on the ground floor. She watched, instead of closing the door, as Farrance drew De Mille away, and out into the night. Then, suddenly, she was aware that the latter had broken from him, and was coming back. He was facing her before she could close the door. His eyes were blazing.

"What's all this mean?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper. "What game are you play-

ing? Who are you — where's — where's Lola? Where's Lola, do you hear — Lola Arnaut?"

Binny wanted to close her eyes. Instead, deliberately, she stared levelly into his. "My dear Gustav!" she retorted — and marvelled at the cool mockery of her own voice. "Have you been drinking to drown the memory of your — sins? . . . Looks rather like it to me! I *am* Lola Arnaut!"

VI

"I AM Lola Arnaut!" Binny found herself repeating the words, under her breath, over and over again, as, having slammed the door, she stood leaning against the panels.

"I *am* Lola Arnaut . . . I *am* Lola Arnaut . . . I *am* . . ."

She stopped, gasping. For a moment she wondered if, perhaps, she had become a little mad. Then that sense of humour which had carried her through many more or less desperate situations since her very babyhood swept back upon her. With a shaky little laugh she began to grope for the electric switch; and, finding it, grew quiet again.

This situation was more than desperate. It was unique. She had witnessed a murder. She had stepped into the murdered woman's shoes. She had bluffed intimates of that woman into the belief that she had every right to the name she claimed. Her identity had remained unquestioned, except by the man De Mille; and she had, out of sheer bravado, prompted by something within her to which

she could give no name, deliberately defied him.

She had declared herself Lola Arnaut. As far as the world to-night was concerned, she *was* Lola Arnaut. There was no reason, that she could see at that particular moment, why she should not remain Lola Arnaut for all time, if she chose. The thought made her draw her breath again, then hold it for a long minute's space. Her face flushed vividly, then paled. Her eyes were wide, half scared, half eager, wholly calculating. Her mouth twitched once, then set in a hard little line of pink.

"Why not?" The words leaped up within her, startlingly, like the unexpected attack of some live thing — instinctively she threw out her hands, then let them fall limply to her sides.

She had been staring straight before her; now she let her glance wander over the tiny hall, with its flower-shaded electric bulbs, its strip of soft grey and rose carpet, its square Oriental rug and tiny tiled table. The heavy scent of dying flowers was all about her — absolute quiet reigned. She wondered, moving slowly forward, if Lola had a maid — if

so, where she might be. Uncertain, hesitant, she crossed the hall. She touched the handle of the door nearest to her, and as it yielded felt for the switch within. The leaping light revealed just such a room as she might have expected Lola Arnaut to possess — a nest of rose hangings and cushions, of padded chairs, deep-mattressed bed, all ribbons and lace covers, and rose-satin eiderdown . . . a toilet-table of white, with a rose-shaded cover, a litter of scent-bottles, powder-boxes, ivory brushes, and an absurd pincushion with a diminutive crinolined doll on the top.

A white cat, superbly coated, lay on a white rug before an almost dead fire. Binny's glance, resting upon it, grew cynically amused. Everything, from the swan's-down-edged slippers set ready beside a white-and-rose Japanese kimono to the cat and the expensive perfume which hung about the room, was for effect. Deliberately, very carefully, Lola had set about creating an atmosphere. Once, Binny remembered, she had been enthusiastically described as "roselike in her loveliness, with the very fragrance of living roses clinging about her . . ." Hence the background, Binny decided—exquisitely artificial;

the merest trifle overdone. Lola had evidently aimed at surroundings expensive and exotic . . . *Lola* . . .

Binny put her hand quickly to her throat, her eyes half closing, the set line of her mouth quivering. Assailed violently by the recollection of Lola as she had last seen her, a pitiful, crumpled heap, with wide, unseeing eyes, and cruelly contorted beauty, she recoiled anew from a situation which was devilish in its fantastic combination of impossibility and simplicity.

Presently she went slowly to the long white-framed mirror, and stood looking long and searchingly at her reflection. And once more amazement swept down upon her at the likeness she bore to the dead woman; amazement not untinged with awe. It merged into a dreamy, detached sense of satisfaction, of wistful self-admiration. Binny had known Lola Arnaut lovely; she had never even thought herself pretty. But now . . .

She brought herself to earth with a quick shudder, turned away, and crossed the room again. Outside the door she hesitated, glancing at the others that surrounded the little hall. She tried one at last, carefully, and

this time found herself within a room charming, if incongruous, with its arrangement of Jacobean sideboard and table, rosewood bureau, a divan covered with a brilliant Oriental rug, and a cretonne-covered screen. An open box of chocolates was on one of the chairs, a tray with syphons, glasses, and decanter on the table. The bureau was open, displaying a medley of letters, bills, newspaper cuttings, a memorandum tablet, and a big, rather beautifully bound suède diary.

Binny was conscious once more of a lump in her throat. At the same time the bureau and its untidy contents caught her attention immediately, drew her to it as with a magnet. In a moment she found herself sitting in a low chair in front of it; timorously she touched a paper here and there — picked up a newspaper cutting, scanning it rapidly — smoothed her hand over the soft surface of the diary. She discovered that it had a tiny hasp, and that it was locked. Again her cheeks flushed, a gleam of interest dawned in her eyes. Slowly, as if impelled against her will, she turned and looked into those eyes reflected in the oval mirror above the mantelpiece behind her.

"I wonder" — she whispered, just above her breath, scarcely realizing that she spoke aloud — "I wonder — could I? *Could* I?"

Her lip quivered, and she caught it between her teeth. She touched the diary again, felt the hasp. It resisted her efforts to open it, and finally she bethought herself of the expensive bag that still dangled from her wrist. She remembered that the latchkey which she had found there had been with other keys upon a small ring. With the same feeling of repugnance she had experienced when she had sought for it to admit herself, she felt for that ring again, drawing it forth at last. She found the key of the diary at once — an absurdly tiny thing — and unlocked the diary.

Her cheeks and eyes were fever-bright now. Her hands shook as she turned the first page. She began to read, and read on, until the sonorous striking of some big clock in the flat brought her struggling stiffly to her feet. She was shivering all over, chilled through, trembling. She closed the diary and locked it. Holding it against her, she felt among the other keys until she found that which made fast the bureau. Then, turning out the light, she scurried, panting, across the hall

to the rose-and-white warmth of the bedroom.

With the diary still held close up against her breast, almost jealously, she went straight to the toilet-table. But now, looking at her reflection, it was as if she had forgotten she was looking at herself — at Binny Clay. To her it seemed that Lola Arnaut stood before her. It was to Lola Arnaut she spoke, very low, rather shakily.

"If it hadn't been for this" — she lifted the diary and laid it among the scents and powders on the table before her — "it wouldn't have been possible — not really. I might have taken your place — as I took it to-night. I might even have held it for a while. But it would have been only for a little while. I'd nothing to back me — no idea of how you've lived, or what you've done . . . I'd have made a slip, sooner or later . . . Pretty soon, I guess . . . But now . . ." She paused and touched the diary again, lips compressed, brows bent. "It *is* possible — now! With what this can tell me — I could carry it through. I know I could. I *know* . . ." she looked up into the mirrored eyes. "And I'm going to! It's been done before, heaps of times. It's just a question of nerve — and luck! And I feel,

somehow — you won't mind, Lola . . ." She checked on the utterance of the name, and put her hand over her lips. Then she laughed, unsteadily. "And I'm not doing it *only* for myself — *only* for what I may gain by it. I'm thinking of you, too. Of to-night — its horror . . . of that man; that awful, awful man . . ." She sobbed suddenly. Leaning both hands upon the dressing-table, she brought her face close to her reflection.

"I'll make him suffer!" she promised, passionately, tensely. "Suffer — to the end — for the unspeakable thing he has done! There'll be that to my credit, anyway! Even *he* isn't sure . . . he can't be! They all thought me Lola Arnaut to-night. The world will think me so to-morrow. I said to — him — a little while ago that I *am* Lola Arnaut — and from to-night, from this very moment, I *will* be her!"

She swayed upright, threw out her hands, then, stumbling across to the bed, flung herself, limp and chill, and utterly exhausted, across it. And presently, with rose-satin eiderdown huddled comforting about her, the white cat purring at her feet, and the scent of roses drenching her with its sweetness, she fell asleep.

VII

That night Binny slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. She roused at the sound of loud knocking upon the door, and the slow, sharp chiming of a clock. For a full minute, huddled into the eiderdown, heavy-eyed, dishevelled, she sat upright upon the bed, struggling rather wildly to collect her scattered thoughts. Last night's happenings seemed like an impossible dream. It was not until she looked down at her crumpled frock, at the white, still somnolent cat, at the pink eiderdown, that her mind began to clear. Recollection leaped at her, almost terrifying, and she turned scared eyes in the direction from which the sound of knocking came.

Who was there? She was asking herself the question as, with a little shiver, she slid her slim feet to the floor and stood, instinctively bracing her whole body, as if to meet some new difficulty. By the time she reached the little hall door, she had all her wits about her. The caution of hard and amazing experi-

ence was in her eyes as she opened it. Upon the threshold a somewhat blowsy young woman, with a pleasant face and a pair of shrewd eyes, was standing. She expressed herself, cheerily, as being immensely relieved at Binny's tardy appearance, passed her, pulling her coat unfastened as she went, and drew a deep breath.

"Thought maybe you'd been murdered, or something!" she announced. "You don't often sleep so heavily. Got a head?" She contemplated the slender, ruffled figure a shade curiously. Binny, though fully dressed, was shuddering and stiff with cold. She opened her lips to answer, but the woman checked her.

"There! But I can see you have! Gallivantin' about after the show . . . I've told you you're not up to that sort of thing, you know! Look here, go and get undressed and into a wrapper — Lor', but it's not like you to sleep in your clothes! That's a fact! And I'll turn the geyser on for your bath and get you a cup of coffee in no time! It'll warm you up and clear your head . . . Has Snowflake been out?"

Again Binny opened her lips. Again closed

them. She had already come to the conclusion that this breezy person was a maid of sorts, and was reflecting, wearily, that the fact added to her complications. Snowflake, she presumed, after something of a mental effort, was the cat. She shook her head dumbly; but the other was already moving kitchenwards.

Binny crept back to the bedroom. She made a grimace of distaste at her reflection in the glass, then dropped into a chair by the dead fire. She was a little frightened, a great deal less sure of herself than she had been last night. For a passing moment she told herself that the situation was beyond her; that she could go no further in this mad impersonation of her sister. She was sitting with her little fists clenched against her temples when the woman came back, with a tray, upon which were toast and a steaming, fragrant cup of coffee. Beyond the open door Binny could hear the running of water.

"Bath'll be ready in five minutes," her companion assured her, setting the tray down on a little table, and proceeding to rake the ashes in the grate — "and I'll have a fire here in no time. You do look a wreck this morn-

ing, and no mistake! Sooner you get that coffee down, the better you'll be!"

Binny nodded gratefully, and picked up the cup. She dared not trust herself to speak, yet deep down in her was a growing amazement at the woman's placid acceptance of her. Furtively, over her shoulder, she glanced once more at the mirror. She saw a girl with dark-circled eyes, pinched lips, and untidy, graceful head. She wondered if Lola had often looked like that — rose-leaf, vivid Lola!

She swallowed the coffee — careless of the fact that it scalded her throat — thirstily. When she set the cup down, a little colour had crept into her white cheeks. Some of her high courage came creeping back; the sight of the suède diary reassured her. She reached out a hand to it, then paused. The woman had gone out of the room; she came back now with a bundle of wood in her arms.

"The bath's ready, pretty near!" she said. She dropped the wood into the grate, opened the wardrobe, and selected a warm wrap. "Here you are! By the time you come back, the fire'll be well alight . . . Run along!"

Binny ran along, smiling grimly, and yet with a faint amusement. She had never, in

her hard-working life, known the luxury of service before. She decided that it was nice to be waited on; but she decided also, shrewdly, that her servant was hardly in keeping with a rose bedroom and a white cat. Nevertheless, by the time she had luxuriated in the perfumed, steaming bath, and had come pattering back to a room aglow with firelight and made miraculously tidy, she concluded that, while her attendant might have faults, she had virtues too. Binny even essayed a wavering smile when a few minutes later the latter presented herself at the door again.

"Better? That's good!" The speaker nodded with an air of satisfaction, swooped on the tray, and stood with it balanced against an ample hip. Eyeing her furtively Binny decided she was clean, homely, and pleasingly bright. Nor, in a plump, rosy way, was she bad-looking.

"You'll feel ready for a bit of breakfast, maybe?" she inquired; and the girl, aware of a growing hunger, ventured to voice her appreciation of the suggestion.

Left alone, searching the wardrobe with hesitant care, she found a plain blue frock

that fitted her gracefully if a little loosely, and got into fresh clothes. Refreshed, once more pleasing to the eyes, she was rapidly recovering her nerve. The chief difficulty at the moment was that she had not the faintest idea of what the servant's name might be; beyond that she was going her way still unchallenged.

She ate the breakfast she found prepared for her, sunk deep in thought, but with the blood throbbing in her veins, and the surging desire for adventure deepening in her soul. It was so easy, this fraud that she was practising — so absolutely, miraculously easy! And it was good to be warm, well-fed, to know, if only for a little while, ease, comfort, the joy of charming surroundings. She had known nothing of any of these things in all her life. From babyhood she had found it necessary to fight her way along life's hard highroad. She had seldom had really enough to eat . . .

Looking back, her eyes dilated, darkened. She shivered, letting her glance stray over the comfortable room, the leaping firelight, the flowers, and her throat contracted. Then, suddenly, she sat rigid. From across the hall had come the vibrant, insistent whir of a telephone. Above it sounded a ponderous

tread; the whirring of the bell ceased, and the servant's voice, mildly impatient, could be heard. Binny, sitting quite still, waited, one hand nervously crumbling her bread. The woman's footsteps sounded again, ceased as once more the telephone bell shrilled its clamorous demand for attention. Again the half-impatient voice could be heard indistinctly. Then its owner appeared at the doorway.

"The first call was from Mr. De Mille," she said. "I didn't think you'd want to be interrupted in the middle of your breakfast — 'specially with a head and all — so I told him to ring again later; that you weren't up." She smoothed her apron down, wrinkling her thick, fair brows. "I don't like Mr. De Mille — never did! . . . To start with, he *will* call me 'Baker' instead of 'Sally,' and I don't like that, either — 'specially the way he drawls it! 'Bak-*ar* — you know how I mean, Miss Lola! I've been 'Sally' ever since I've been in service, and it's good enough for me. Your high-falutin' second names for the likes of me riles me — I like to be homely — can't stand swank!"

Binny drew in her breath. Her eyes bright-

ened, and she dropped them quickly to the plate in front of her. "Sally" . . . Sally Baker. At least she was in possession now of the woman's name, and her way easier in consequence.

"Well?" She forced herself to speak, finishing on a half-scared cough. Lola's voice on the stage was familiar enough to her, quite sweet, rather weak, and with a pronounced, not unattractive lisp. Binny's own was softer, usually very clear. Now it was husky with strain and weariness, and, until she had met Sally's sharp, surprised glance, she had forgotten the need of caution in this respect.

"Got a cold, too, it seems!" Sally observed, half reproachfully. "Colds don't pay in your business, believe me; you'll want to be a bit more careful than you've been lately — unless you're thinking of giving up the stage?" Her tone was curious, questioning.

Binny gave a nervous laugh. "Good Heavens, no! Not after last night, anyway." She paused, looking up into the other woman's face. She was wondering how much Sally might know of her affairs, personal and professional, how much she might learn from her, tactfully, that would prove of advantage to

herself. She added, slowly: "I'm a bit hoarse — I was singing a good deal — after the show — last night. Mr. — Mr. Dallas had some new songs and I was trying them for him." She nearly laughed at the astonishment in Sally's plump face. It was quite evident that Lola's maid, like her intimate friends, had no illusions as to her vocal abilities.

"Mr. *Dallas?*" — Sally checked herself. "The second call was from Mr. Van Bevan. He wants you to go round to Mr. Dallas's flat about eleven-thirty this morning without fail. I say, you haven't got a chance with old Van Bevan, *really?*"

Binny pushed aside her plate and rose. Her cheeks were brilliantly flushed now; she was conscious of a warm glow of excitement and triumph at the recollection of last night's success. "I've got the chance of my life!" she declared. "*The* chance . . ." She broke off, and stood with both hands pressing hard upon the table, looking with far-away gaze into the fire. She was seeing a new future — a future built up upon Lola's name, but with her own talent to make it stable. She was telling herself that, come what might — whether or not her impersonation was dis-

covered — she would have had an opportunity of showing what she was worth. She straightened herself at last, and smiled — a queer, quaint, crooked smile that was absolutely her own.

Sally stared at her, frowned, then, in her favourite attitude, with her hands on her hips, drew a deep breath. "Well, I declare! And look at you! A different person already, just thinkin' of it. I'm glad, miss — I am, honest. Not that I ever thought you'd pull it off — old Van Bevan's that particular. But I suppose" — she twinkled slyly — "Mr. Farrance had quite a bit to do with it; and of course you're one of the prettiest young ladies of the profession I've ever been with. A real beauty, that's what I say, and always have said. Not but what you've been setting too much store by your looks — getting a bit vain just lately, what with your pictures in the papers and all." She stopped for breath. Binny laughed, shakily. Sally began to clear the table. "Not but what you'd be wiser, to my way of thinking, to get married and chuck the stage. Beauty don't last, and — no offence, Miss Lola — you can't *do* anything much . . . ."

"Oh, yes, I can!" Binny, bright-eyed, spoke in sudden perfect imitation of Lola's lisping, lazy utterance. "Oh, yes, I can, Sally! There — there's a lot more in me than you know!" Her laugh this time was just a shade hysterical. A born actress, she was fitting herself, subtly, deftly, into the rôle that had become hers. Already, as last night, she was playing to a new audience. She was trying her wings, and finding them stronger with every passing minute. But she was still faintly scared, still awed by her own temerity and daring.

Sally, gathering up the cloth, pursed her lips and shook her head. "But Van Bevan's show!" she discouraged. "Guess you don't know what you've let yourself in for, my dear . . . Sorry! Forgot you don't like being called that . . . There's the bell!"

She was gone more swiftly than Binny had dreamed possible in a person of her anything but sylph-like proportions; and with a faint flutter of apprehension at her heart the girl stood listening.

A moment later the door was opened again. Sally, still with the cloth over her arm, announced, in her cheerfully strident voice:

"Mr. Farrance, miss," and, with a look that was perilously near a wink, disappeared.

Binny, her hand against her throat, turned swiftly. Her eyes were wide, dark with uneasiness and question. Panic was upon her, but it passed as Farrance advanced towards her. In the bright light of morning he looked bigger and browner and more wholesomely boyish than ever, and Binny was aware of a little stirring of her heartstrings, that odd, comforting sensation of warmth and well-being she had known at his touch last night.

He caught both her hands in his as he reached her side, holding her a little away from him. "You're not utterly done up, then?" he demanded, and, as she shook her head dumbly, he drew a deep breath of relief. "Thank the Lord for that! I was quite worried about you last night — I've been thinking about you ever since!"

Her hands still lay in his. She made a movement to release them, but he tightened his grip, and now his face was grown serious, the careless gaiety gone from his eyes.

"I don't know whether you know it, Lola, but you're a wonder — an absolute wonder! You knocked us all out at Dallas's over those

songs, I assure you. Van Bevan is raving about you — even old Dallas is a bit enthusiastic. We none of us dreamed you — you could do anything like it!"

He let go her hands suddenly and put his own upon her shoulders. "Are you going to be able to keep it up?" he asked. "If so, you'll make a sensation. And then — " He broke off, dropped his hands and turned abruptly to the window. Binny looked after him with puzzled eyes and a queer sensation of breathlessness. He spoke presently, without looking round: "And then — maybe you won't be wanting me hanging round quite so much."

Binny gave a quick exclamation. She was taken aback and startled, bewildered. Farrance wheeled round, hesitated, then came quickly to her side. He did not touch her now, but in his eyes was a light that made her heart leap, then seem to stop beating altogether.

"I've thought a whole lot about you, Lola, ever since I've known you. No man could well help thinking about you. Only — until last night — I didn't quite realize how deep my feeling for you has become. Last night — somehow — everything was different. You

were so changed — so wonderfully changed! Or else" — he laughed — "perhaps I was beginning to see more clearly . . ."

The girl made an involuntary, precipitate movement away from him, but once more he caught her hands, lifting them this time against his breast.

"Lola," he said — and there was a sudden vibrant tenderness in his voice — "I don't want you to go on with this contract of Van Bevan's. I don't want to share you any more! I don't want you to work — I want you to let me look after you. My dear, I've been pretty blind all this time not to guess it before, but — I love you!"

VIII

"I LOVE you!" Farrance repeated the words passionately, eagerly, with a sort of boyish appeal that, even at that moment, brought a passing gleam of sympathy to Binny's wide, frightened eyes — a glow of rose to her cheeks. He drew her closer, not giving her time to speak. "I suppose I've loved you all the time," he went on, "though I did not guess it until last night. I've wanted to be with you, of course — I valued your friendship greatly, but I didn't know I was in love!"

Binny gave a smothered exclamation, striving to free herself, but he held her fast, speaking rapidly, very earnestly: "I think it must have been because I somehow didn't seem to know *you* — the real you — until last night. You've seemed a different person since last night . . ."

This time Binny gasped outright. Abruptly she ceased to struggle, staring at him, her breath held, her lower lip caught between her teeth. What did he mean by that? Did he — could he — suspect?

She relaxed with a quivering breath of relief as he went on: "You've been tantalizing us all this time — pretending to be quite a different sort of person — hiding your personality as well as your talent . . . Oh, Lola! Don't look so amazed. You must have guessed, if I did not realize it, that you were becoming more than just a friend — My dear, I love you . . ."

"No, no! Oh, *no!*"

Binny freed herself with a violent jerk at last. She spoke on a shrill note of protest, the colour burning high in her cheeks, then dying again. "You don't! You don't! You *can't!*"

The surprised hurt of his eyes calmed her. She caught at her vanishing self-control and made a quick, rather wild gesture of her hands.

"Please!" she begged. "You're just joking!" There was appeal in her eyes, in her voice. She kept her hands outstretched as if to hold him away from her. This unexpected turn of affairs had come upon her in the nature of a blow. Had she thought about it, she might have conceived the possibility of this man caring for her, in some fashion.

But she had not thought about it. Now it was being borne in upon her that yet further complications had arisen. The idea of Farrance caring, as she knew instinctively he cared, badly scared her, left her breathless. Of a sudden she found herself looking upon herself as an impostor — a cheat.

For a moment she wavered; for a moment she wondered if she could still go on. The light in Farrance's eyes disturbed her. It was a light she had seen before in other men's eyes, and had very firmly discouraged. But those men had not been like this man. He was different, as everything else in this mad masquerade was different. She felt herself trembling; knew a desperate desire to still the words she guessed were still waiting his utterance. Under the astonishment and puzzled pain of his steady gaze, she flushed anew, unhappily. "Oh, *please!*" She begged again, speaking jerkily and at random, in an endeavour to stave off any further declaration, and to collect her own scattered senses. "You must be joking? You can't be in earnest! I —" She broke off.

Farrance made a swift, nervous movement, and his eyes darkened. "Joking! Good God!

What do you take me for? A stage-door hanger-on? An idle flirt, making meaningless love as an idle pastime? You ought to know me better than that, Lola, by now!" There was a little of anger as well as of deep reproach in his tone, and Binny made a helpless gesture. Her big eyes were very troubled, her lip was not quite steady. "You ought to know I'm not the kind to jest about anything like this! That I haven't just been playing round, like half the rest of 'em, to make love to you as a sort of game. I *am* in earnest! I'd tell no woman I loved her unless I meant it — from the depths of my soul! I *do* love you! Before — at first — perhaps I didn't. Not *love* you! I liked you, very much. I admired you immensely; I was interested in you, and I valued our friendship — really valued it. I wanted to see you get on — I felt protective towards you, wanted to help you. I never wanted just to flirt, though . . ."

"Oh — don't!" Binny spoke faintly, distressedly, but he did not seem to hear.

"I'd have done pretty nearly anything for you — as I'd do anything for Irma; anything to help. . . . But I didn't feel the same

as I've felt since last night. I fell in love with you — as a man only falls in love once — really for the first time last night, Lola! And I guess" — his voice took a sudden, unexpected gentleness, a surging warmth that made Binny catch her breath sharply — "I guess it's the sort of love that — that stays the same, right through!" He cleared his throat, uneasily. The steady blue eyes were embarrassed, yet intent in their seriousness. His face was deeply flushed.

A silence fell between them, and Binny turned quickly away. A queer, eager desire to soothe the hurt that she knew she had dealt him was upon her. Mingled with it was a terror of a situation which she felt was beyond her. For a while, her back turned to him, she stood by the window, looking out unseeingly with eyes that were still wide, a little scared, but strangely soft. She was more stirred, more deeply touched than she had guessed. Her pulses were not quite steady; now and then, recollecting his words, her heart, perplexingly, missed a beat.

He believed her to be Lola. He had, however, confessed that he had actually not fallen in love with her until last night. *Last night!*

. . . Her lips parted, the colour came rushing back, glorious, to her cheeks. Then he had not really been in love with Lola — he had fallen in love with herself! She lifted her hands and pressed the cool palms against her hot cheeks. She did not know what to think, what to do — She caught her breath as she heard him follow her across the room; held it as his hands touched her shoulders.

"Lola!" There was a caress in his voice, an appeal, that thrilled her, in spite of herself. "Dear, I'm — I'm a clumsy brute! I don't know how to express myself — how to make you quite understand the way I feel! All I know is that I love you . . . love you . . . love *you!*"

His arms went swiftly about her; his face was buried in her hair, and for a minute Binny remained quite still, her heart beating wildly. Then she struggled free and faced him.

"Don't!" she cried, almost pantingly. *"Don't!"* She was rather white, her eyes very brilliant.

Farrance looked at her, and let his arms fall to his sides. Into his face there came bewilderment, question, disappointment. "I'm sorry!" he said, and in his voice there was

something that made her wince. "I thought you'd understand — care enough to — to —"

"I *do!*" Binny spoke eagerly; then her face flamed. "I mean — I don't! Don't — don't understand, that is. You —I'd never thought of you — of you — caring! We've just seemed friends — the best possible friends! . . ." She trailed rather helplessly to a stop. She had shot a bow at a venture, and watched him, anxiously.

He nodded. "So it seemed to me — until last night!" he agreed quietly. "Now . . . Oh, Lola!" His hands went out to her again, pleadingly.

She evaded them, breathing rather quickly; her palms going once more to her cheeks.

Farrance looked at her wistfully: "You're not going to turn me down, are you, Lola? I suppose I've blundered, like a fool — startled you and upset you. But you won't let it make any difference between us? Things can be just as they've always been until — until you can make up your mind how you feel about me?"

He came a step nearer, and now, in spite of her resistance, he took possession, masterfully, of the slim fingers once more. "Let me

try and make you care, Lola!" he urged, and something in his voice brought a little lump to Binny's throat, an unexpected flash of tears to her eyes.

She looked down at her hands, stirring in his, then up again into his eyes. "I'd like — things — to be just the same as before," she told him, after a long moment of hesitation, and with a growing consciousness that the security of this man's friendship was already something that she desired — needed, perhaps more especially now. "Only — I don't want you to make love to me. I — I haven't thought of you like that. I'd rather — just be friends — for a little while, anyway."

The ardent gaze bent upon hers warmed eagerly, and she coloured, then smiled in spite of her perturbation.

The next moment she was grave again. "I want to go through with this contract with Mr. Van Bevan. I want to prove, if possible, that there really *is* something in me — something worth while. I want to think — just of making good until I know how much I can do. You do understand?"

Farrance was looking at her with the shadow of a faint wonderment in his eyes.

"How much you can *do!* My dear, you gave me the surprise of my life last night. If you can keep that sort of thing up, there's not much doubt of what you'll *do!* You'll go racing clean ahead, and right to the top of the tree! There's not the smallest doubt about that! Van Bevan says so. Better, Ivo Dallas says so. What knocks us all is why you've lain low about your accomplishments for so long. It's going to be rather hard on Scarlossi, isn't it?"

Binny shook her head. She was in no condition of mind for argument, and, at the moment, quite incapable of dishing up whatever explanation had come glibly to her tongue upon the previous evening. She felt thoroughly bewildered; almost dazed.

To her relief, Farrance continued: "Not that that is the question in point. Lola — haven't you anything more to say to me? Just a little hope to give me?"

Once more Binny shook her head. Then: "Only the same as I said just now. I want to see how well I can work. I don't want to — to think about flirting — and love . . ." She paused. The eyes she lifted to his were wistful. "All the same," she said upon an

impulse — "I do want us to stay friends — real friends — if you will?"

Farrance turned her hand over in his and looked down at the little pink palm. He sighed. "All right!" he said boyishly. "Only — only if later on you come to the conclusion that you don't want me hanging round — or if you're getting tired — I want you to let me know. You're going right up among the stars, you know, Lola. And I — "

"And you're the best friend I've got!" Binny declared with a conviction born of pure intuition. "I — I'm quite sure that I'll *always* want you — just as you are! And then I'll never get tired!"

Farrance's eyes drank deeply of hers. She kept her own steady with an effort that surprised her. Then he bent his head and kissed, very gently, the over-thin, white wrist. "Thank you!" he said, and released her.

She hesitated, smiled at him tremulously, then made a nervous gesture. "And now," she said, with an assumption of lightness and ease which she was very far from feeling, "I'm going to send you away. I've got a fearful head!"

She was brought up short, and instantly

on her guard at the blank expression of Farrance's face.

"Send me away?" he echoed. "But — what about Irma? She's waiting outside now!"

IX

Binny blinked. "Irma!" she echoed stupidly, and glanced involuntarily over her shoulder, as though in the hope of seeing into the street beyond.

Farrance, looking at her, passed his hand over his smooth hair. "Oh, I say!" he protested ruefully. "You're not going to tell me you've forgotten we're lunching with her and Terry O'Farrer? She came along with me to fetch you, and offer congratulations. She's awfully interested in you, you know, Lola."

Binny passed a hand that was not quite steady across her eyes. She felt at that moment that she was rapidly nearing the verge of hysteria. Irma! Who was Irma? Vaguely she recollected that Farrance had already mentioned the name; she cudgelled her brains to remember exactly what he had said. ". . . I'd have done pretty nearly anything for you, as I'd do anything for Irma! . . ." The sentence came floating back to her, and, letting her hand fall, she turned quickly away.

"I'm most awfully sorry!" she declared, rather faintly. "But — I'm afraid I had forgotten! Such a lot has happened since yesterday — I'm beginning to feel utterly dazed." She spoke with an unconscious weariness that was not lost upon him.

He slid a strong hand beneath her elbow. "Poor kid! I guess you are! Anyway, never mind. Just run along and get your outdoor things on. Irma's a jolly good sport, but she's inclined to be impatient, and we've kept her the deuce of a time as it is."

Under his touch Binny stirred ever so slightly. She felt more bewildered and helpless than ever, completely at a loss how to act. Then the sound of Sally's voice, humming across the little hall, brought remembrance of Van Bevan's telephone message, and she flung a quick glance at the clock.

"But — but I'm afraid I can't!" She drew away, looking at him apologetically. "You see, Mr. Van Bevan wants me. He — he sent a message to say he'd expect me at Mr. Dallas's flat at eleven-thirty, sharp. And it's nearly that now."

Inwardly she was thanking the fates for what she hoped might be a respite. Far-

rance made a protesting gesture. His expression was so acutely disappointed that the girl giggled half hysterically.

"Oh, but I say, Lola! Irma's put off half a dozen engagements for this lunch, and she's hoping to get Harkness to join us. It was awfully decent of her to think of it — especially as she doesn't care a very great deal about him. Only he has a pretty good deal of influence with Van Bevan, I fancy — not that that matters quite so much now you've made good on your own. But — but — oh, dash it all! You've just *got* to come! You can't get out of it. Really you can't!"

Binny sat down abruptly in the nearest chair. Her brain was beginning to whirl again; once more a feeling of panic was rising within her. "But — Mr. Van Bevan? . . ."

Farrance frowned at the clock. Already it was nearing the half-hour, and he turned quickly to the door. "I'll go and tell Irma to send the car back for us to Dallas's flat, then I'll come back and take you across there. We can join Irma and Terry as soon as Van Bevan's through with you. . . . Irma will understand. Only you want to get a move on."

He was gone before Binny could answer. She heard him greeting Sally cheerily, then the slam of the door behind him. Rather slowly she got up, passing out of the room, and across to the white-and-rose bower beyond.

Sally was at the wardrobe, selecting a wrap. She threw it over the back of a chair as the girl entered, and demanded over her shoulder: "That do? . . . And what hat are you going to wear? I'd say that new tricorne — 'specially as you haven't time to change your frock."

Binny nodded dumbly. Without speaking she suffered herself to be assisted into the hat in question; she agreed mutely with Sally's selection of hatpins and gloves. For a passing instant, viewing her reflection, a little colour mounted to her cheeks and her eyes brightened, but the sound of the bell ringing made her catch her breath.

Sally eyed her shrewdly, reached for an ivory box and opened it, displaying the rouge within. "Just a touch," she suggested. "Not that you need it as a rule; only you're a bit washed out this morning — and no wonder. That'll be Mr. Farrance back. I'll let him in."

Binny stood looking down at the rouge; then thoughtfully she studied her own face in the glass. She was decidedly pale, and once her hand went out to the ivory jar. Then she changed her mind, oddly certain that, "washed out" or not, Farrance would prefer her untouched by cosmetics. The thought startled her; she swung away from the glass and out into the hall.

Farrance, chatting easily to Sally, had a great bunch of violets in his hands. "Had them in the car for you," he explained as he gave them to her. "Brought 'em along. I hope you'll like them."

Binny took them with a little cry of delight that brought both the man's and the servant's eyes to her in a passing surprise. "They're lovely!" She looked up, her small face irradiated by a smile that Farrance had never seen there before, and which made him gasp. He seemed about to speak, changed his mind, and a moment later was piloting Binny out of the building in the direction of Dallas's flat.

The latter, impatient, irritable, sceptical in the new light of day, the lock of hair on his forehead lanker than ever, and his eyes more protruding, greeted her gruffly. Van

Bevan, behind him, assured her she was late, and that his time was money. At sight of Farrance, he shrugged, and grinned his sudden, amiable grin.

"Since you're goin' to be a star, m'dear — a *real* star — I suppose I'll have to give in to your whims. But I'm not Scarlossi, and don't forget it. We want to try a song or two right here, and if you come across as you did last night — why, then, anyway rehearsals Monday morning, ten o'clock — and a pretty hefty talkin' to, not to speak of the fine, if you don't turn up — star or no star!"

Binny smiled at him tranquilly. Persons of Van Bevan's type — in a lesser degree — were very familiar to her. Off the stage she was not afraid of them; within this room she was already wrapping herself about with the mantle of last night's triumph. At her side she was conscious of Farrance, big, adoring, influential.

"I'm ready!" she assured Dallas, with a nod, and let her wrap slip from her shoulders.

Thereafter, amazingly, she lost herself in the art that was hers. She emerged from something like a dream to find Van Bevan beaming upon her. But she only heard

Farrance's quiet whisper, very close to her ear, as he put her cloak about her shoulders again: "Lola! *Lola!* . . . You're a wonder!"

And her heart was still singing as she passed into the lounge of the fashionable hotel where he had told her they would find "Irma" waiting, her lips were smiling, her eyes brilliant as diamonds, yet dreamy, far away . . .

She came to earth at the sound of a woman's voice, liltingly sweet, beautifully modulated: "Dudley! At last! I thought you were never coming!"

Binny's eyes flashed wide. She became aware of a little woman, so small as to be doll-like, yet exquisitely proportioned. A woman of bronze hair, bronze eyes, and wonderful, warm, rich skin that toned exquisitely with both. At her side a red-haired young giant, with eyes like an Irish sea, smiled in cheery welcome. Just behind her another man stood, a man of perhaps forty-five, well-groomed, yet subtly different from both Dudley Farrance and the red-haired boy. A man suggesting power, and possessed, the instant he smiled, of a very definite charm. A man who was, to Binny,

elusively, bewilderingly familiar, while she had no recollection of ever having met him before.

An instant later she knew why. His eyes, arresting, intent, were upon her. She met them, scarcely knowing that she did so, and drew her breath with a swift sense of shock. It was as if she had looked, closely, into a mirror reflecting Lola Arnaut's eyes — or her own.

X

THE effect of that first glance was so uncanny that Binny nearly exclaimed. It was with an effort that she recovered from it, gave her attention hastily to that which was going on about her. She found that the woman with the beautiful bronze hair was holding out a diminutive hand towards her.

"I'm so glad to see you, Miss Arnaut," she was saying cordially — "and most awfully interested in the little my brother has told me about your new contract with Mr. Van Bevan. I wish you all success!"

The words were accompanied by a smile that brought an answering glow to Binny's eyes. She was strangely, and instantly, at home with this woman. Her unease dropped from her; moreover, she had gleaned in a flash the relationship between Farrance and the dainty, intriguing person whose tiny fingers still touched hers.

"Thank you!" She spoke rather low, with a note of diffidence that made Irma Farrance look at her quickly, slightly frowning. She had met Lola Arnaut for the first time not

many hours previously, and had found her anything but shy. There was something about this girl which made it suddenly possible to understand her brother's admiration. Irma herself had always admired Lola Arnaut's physical perfections. She had not been so sure, meeting her, that she would go further in her interest. The real Lola Arnaut had been beautiful. Binny was beautiful, and something more. A spark of sympathy seemed to radiate between them.

Irma, suddenly recollecting the others, released Binny's hand and glanced negligently over her shoulder at the man just behind her. Binny was vaguely conscious of the faintest hardening of that wonderful, sweetly low voice of hers when she spoke; of the least alteration in her expression, though her lips remained smiling.

She said: "But I forgot. I don't think you know Mr. Harkness yet!"

The man came forward, smiling, and Binny caught her breath, more than ever conscious of the feeling that she was looking into her own eyes.

Irma spoke, smoothly, softly: "Mr. Kyrle Harkness—Miss Arnaut," and turned quickly

to the red-haired young man as Harkness bowed over Binny's hand.

"I have been wanting to meet you for a long time, Miss Arnaut," he murmured; and Binny, wondering if the words were insincere, decided that the voice was not unpleasant. She did not answer, but let her brows flash up. Harkness laughed, a deep, rather throaty laugh. Binny felt that he had read her thought; he answered it, whether consciously or unconsciously she could not tell.

"I could have managed to before, I suppose — but not under such pleasant circumstances." He turned slightly to Irma Farrance, who was talking animatedly to the red-haired young man and did not look round. "Besides which," he added urbanely to Binny, "I am a business man — and a busy business man at that! . . . . ." He paused, hesitated, and coughed.

Irma made a slight gesture, still without turning: "Oh, come along, all of you!" She tucked her hand into the red-haired young man's arm, and moved forward. "I'm literally starving! . . . . Dud, as a mere brother, you've got to be odd man out!"

Farrance flung a glance at Binny of mock

despair that made her blush rosily, and bite her lip because of it; and, with another of reproach at the back of his sister's exquisite head, he fell in behind the little procession.

The luncheon was a gay and absolutely informal one, and Binny, after the first few moments of awkwardness, thoroughly enjoyed it. Ever adaptable to circumstances, quick to learn as well as to observe, she had soon more or less forgotten herself, and was completely at ease. She missed, while she talked, no detail of the service, or of her companions' table manners. Her few blunders she covered so deftly that they went unobserved. The food itself fascinated her. Whimsically reminding herself that fried fish and chips had until now been the greatest gastronomic luxury she had known, she applied herself to the fare before her with the earnest appreciation of a small child.

She looked up once to find Kyrle Harkness's eyes upon her, and flushed. Upon her other side she knew that Farrance was watching her with something of amusement, and perplexity.

Harkness said: "Irma — Miss Farrance — has just been telling me that you're going to

be in Van Bevan's show — that, in fact, you've made something of a hit. I wish you the best of luck!"

Once more Binny drew a deep, relieved breath. Farrance's sister, then, was unmarried — was Irma Farrance. So far, so good! She answered Harkness's small talk appropriately, the while she observed her hostess with a closer interest.

Irma was engaged in making herself provocatively charming to the young giant at her side. Binny, remembering that Farrance had said they were lunching with Irma and one Terry O'Farrer, came to the conclusion that the red-haired one was the O'Farrer in question, and also, since he had greeted her merely with a grin and a handshake, that she was supposed to know him. It was obvious to all that he was deeply enamoured of the little lady at his side. He hung upon her every word, her most fleeting smile. He claimed her attention whenever possible. He glared, upon occasions, at Kyrle Harkness. And it dawned upon Binny presently that Kyrle Harkness glared back!

But he made himself very charming to Binny herself; he talked of the theatre, of

her past successes, her possible future triumph. Speaking warily, drawing alike upon her imagination and her experience, she answered him. She began to enjoy herself, with that fearful enjoyment that some people experience in walking too close to the edge of a cliff!

Nor was she without a certain sense of satisfaction at realizing that Farrance — odd man out, indeed — was glowering at her jealously. The knowledge brought the colour deliciously to her cheeks, gave her a thrill such as she had never experienced before. She smiled at him once, shyly, delightfully, and with a smothered exclamation he leaned towards her. Rose-red, still athrill, she turned hastily to Harkness again.

Thereafter she allowed him to monopolize her attention, but later, finding herself momentarily alone with Terry O'Farrer, and separated from the others, she asked swiftly: "Who is Mr. Harkness?"

"Who . . .?" O'Farrer echoed the word blankly. "Good grief! *You* ought to know, seeing what he's putting up for Van Bevan's show!" He was regarding her with such amazement that Binny went cold.

"I mean," she explained hastily — "*what* is he — er — exactly?" Hoping fervently that she had not once more tripped, she waited in trepidation.

Terry O'Farrer shrugged. "There you have me! Lord knows — I don't. An' the divil of any other fellow, by the same token. 'Something in the City' — just 'Something in the City' Harkness is — and aiming to climb the social ladder because of the money he's rolling in!" His tone was bitter. The gay inconsequence had left his bearing. He eyed Irma, talking to Harkness, sombrely, his big shoulders hunched, his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

Binny, feeling that she was treading upon delicate ground, adroitly changed the subject, digesting rapidly the facts that Kyrle Harkness was by way of aspiring to a sphere to which he had not been born, was a person of wealth, if not of position, and was "putting up" for Van Bevan's show. Hence the reason that Irma Farrance had gone out of her way, obviously at her brother's instigation, to include him in her luncheon party.

Another thing also was plain. Terry O'Farrer was seriously in love with Farrance's

brown witch of a sister. Binny did not wonder. The more she saw of Irma Farrance, the more fascinating she found her. Throughout her drab existence she had met no woman at all like Irma. She loved to watch her, the lissom grace of the tiny body, the expressive white hands, the eyebrows, the warm red lips — the birdlike turn of the shining head. It was by no means surprising that Terry loved her. Binny looked from him, six foot three, if an inch, to the elfin creature standing well below her own shoulder, and smiled with the indulgence of one in whose heart there is always a soft spot for lovers.

She looked at Farrance, almost as big, if not so boyishly awkward, as Terry himself. And then she sighed, without quite knowing why, except that this was such a different world into which she had stepped, overnight, like a daring yet half-tragic Cinderella.

Something stirred in her that she had never known before; something at once wistful, yearning. Her soul as well as her thin body had hitherto been starved. Now . . . She drew a long breath, and glanced up to find that Harkness had come back. Terry O'Farrer, murmuring a quick excuse, joined Farrance and his sister.

Binny looked at Harkness with a new curiosity. She had met with his type before, but not in such pleasant guise. He was not of Irma's world, not of her kind. But he was perfectly at ease in his surroundings; he had acquired a veneer which allowed him to pass, to the casual eye, as the Farrances' equal. Binny sensed the difference in him, even while she decided that he was very likeable.

He smiled upon her now genially. "Van Bevan was talking of making a contract with you, Miss Arnaut, for the new show, but I didn't know until today that anything definite was settled. What sort of part?" Unconsciously, perhaps, his tone implied a doubt of her ability to fill any rôle particularly successfully.

Nettled, Binny flushed, then laughed. An imp of mischief shone in her eyes. "I'm not quite sure," she returned demurely. "But from what Mr. Van Bevan and Mr. Dallas said this morning, I fancy I'm to take Lottie Carrall's place. She's ill, you know . . . ."

"*What?*" Harkness's expression was genuinely startled. "But — Good Lord! . . . ." He stopped, coughed, and made a helpless

gesture. For a minute or two he stared at her. "Good Lord!" he said again. "I must go along and see Van Bevan. I — er — as perhaps you know, I've a fairly big interest in this particular show — "

Binny nodded, non-committally, her lip between her teeth. She was half amused and half troubled at Harkness's obvious consternation.

Unexpectedly, from across the room Irma's voice broke in upon their conversation. "Miss Arnaut seems to have quite a surprise for every one, Mr. Harkness," she said. "From all accounts Mr. Van Bevan is highly enthusiastic." She smiled at Binny, and the girl flushed gratefully.

Harkness cleared his throat. He was studying her rather thoughtfully; then he shrugged. "Old Van Bevan generally knows what he's playing at!" he conceded, if a shade grudgingly. He added, unexpectedly: "Oh, by the way, Miss Arnaut, while I was in Paris I met your father. Indeed, he and I were on the same boat coming back here —"

He stopped short. Binny was staring at him dumbly, her eyes wide, so utterly dis-

mayed that the man made a quick movement of apology.

"I am so sorry! I did not think — I had quite forgotten the newspaper chatter as to — er —your father being opposed to your stage career. I hope I haven't blundered very badly?" There was genuine contrition in his voice.

But Binny did not heed and did not answer. A small, scared voice was whispering within her: "My *father* — Lola's father — here — in England!"

XI

Two days later, towards dusk, Irma Farrance drove up to the door of her home in Kyrle Harkness's car. At the top of the short flight of steps she paused and gave him her hand.

"I'm not going to ask you to come in this evening," she told him; and added hastily as she saw his look of keen disappointment: "I'm very tired, and my head's begun to ache rather badly. I'll have to go to a rather big affair with mother to-night, and I'd like to rest. You do understand?"

"Of course!" Harkness's voice was oddly gentle, and at the look in his eyes a faint colour swept into Irma's face and died again, leaving her unwontedly pale. She drew her hand away and turned with relief as the door opened, passing rather hastily across the threshold.

As in a moment the door closed again, shutting Harkness out, she drew a long breath, and moved listlessly towards the stairs.

The maid followed her. "Mr. O'Farrer is in the morning room, miss."

Irma checked an exclamation, and stopped short. She stood hesitant, with bitten lip, as if about to make some excuse. Then she changed her mind, and with a word of thanks crossed the hall again to the morning room.

O'Farrer was lounging by the window, one big shoulder against the frame, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. At Irma's entrance he straightened and came forward, his whole, good-looking, freckled face lighting up eagerly. His expression changed as his glance rested upon her.

Binny would scarcely have recognized Irma at this moment. All the brilliance, and sparkle, and care-free gaiety were gone. She looked jaded, utterly weary. The red mouth drooped; there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

"Irma!" Terry's voice held startled questioning. His big hands went out to her, and for an instant her lips quivered. She gave him her own, then drew them hurriedly away again.

"What's up? You look fagged out?" He spoke with concern, and the girl tried to smile in reassurance. She failed dismally, and made a sharp gesture.

"Oh — everything! And I am! Fagged, and bothered, and — and fed up!"

For a moment he stood looking at her. In the half light of the room she seemed ridiculously small, and fragile, like some Dresden china thing. O'Farrer's throat contracted; the blue of his eyes seemed to deepen and to glow. He went to her, laying strong hands upon her slender shoulders, towering above her. At his touch she grew rigid, then relaxed and swayed a little towards him.

"Oh, Terry! . . . How I wish I were a cottager's kid, selling eggs and vegetables and flowers — and with nothing to worry about but having a roof — and enough bread and butter to satisfy me! . . . Or a clerk — or a chorus girl — anything *useful* — and unimportant . . ." Her voice caught hysterically. Terry's grip of her shoulders tightened. "But I'm not! I'm a Farrance! . . . It's reputed that there's a sprinkle of royal blood still in our veins — though we've scarcely a penny to bless ourselves with, and no credit! . . . For the rest, I'm marketable! I've blood, and breeding, and — beauty!"

She writhed out of Terry's hands and went to the mirror over the mantelpiece, eyeing

herself grimly. "These things," she proceeded, "I am expected to exchange for — money! Oh, Terry — I assure you, these days, it's no world for folks who are poor!" Her tone was cynical, bitter.

Terry's mouth twisted grimly. "Sure, you've said it! It's tricksy enough for those who have, but for those who haven't . . ." He stopped. In the mirror she saw his young face grow bleak; harassed, hard. Her own puckered; she hid it hastily in the curve of her arm.

"I'm so tired!" she whispered huskily. "So *tired!*"

And, in a minute, once more his arms were round her, crushing her so close that she gasped for breath. "Oh! Heart of the heart of me! But it's the world itself I'd be giving, not to speak of the breath of me and every drop of blood in my body to pick you right up in my two arms and carry you off, this blessed minute! . . . Irma! *Irma!*" He lifted her bodily, holding her as he might have held a child. His mouth found hers, and with a little sob she lay still, her eyes closed. Terry's lips went from her mouth to her lids.

He whispered, shakily, his heart athrob

against hers: "Oh — Irma! You're such a kid! Such a little, little thing . . . . And I love you!"

The warmth that had crept into Irma's face died out of it. "Put me down!" she said, and there was that in the trailing weariness of her voice that made him obey, unquestioning. She did not look at him as he set her on her feet. She said, rather tonelessly: "You mustn't . . . . I told you, before! Father's a martinet — mother's a mule!" Her lips set almost viciously. "And you're hopelessly ineligible — a gambler — penniless! *I*" — her eyes, strangely tragic, opened wide into his — "I, as I have already said, am marketable — possessed of blood, and birth, and beauty! And I'm not twenty-one for two years yet!"

"Twenty-one! Good Gad!" Terry exploded with unexpected violence, his blue eyes aflame, his red hair rumpled. "They can't pull that stuff over you in these days! Or, anyway, if they try to, there's one way out — if you care enough! I — I'll rake up some money, somewhere, somehow, and we'll — get out! Just you and I, kiddy — and build some kind of a little old world of our own!"

Irma looked at him, and looked away again. She shook her head. "We couldn't. If we did, it would kill father! Not" — her mouth twisted in a grim smile — "because he loves me so much, but because any shock — any sort of opposition — is likely to cause a stroke, and might prove fatal."

She evaded his hand, and walked to the window. It was so dark now that he could scarcely see her face, and she kept it averted, staring at the blur beyond the pane of glass. After an appreciable silence she said, very deliberately, with a sort of level quiet: "Terry — Kyrle Harkness asked me to marry him, to-day!"

XII

"HARKNESS — asked *you* to marry *him!*"

At the indignant incredulity of his tone, Irma choked on a rather shrill, hysterical laugh. She checked it, nodding dumbly. For a moment Terry stared at her in silent stupefaction, then a wave of wrath rose within him, and broke with a violence that wrenched a cry of protest from the girl.

"The beastly bounder! The insufferable, conceited, money-bloated outsider! The —"

"Terry!" There was appeal in the word, something more — something that stayed the rush of the boy's wrath, and left him still, staring at her with eyes that had lost their fire and taken in its place a sharp, anxious questioning.

"You mustn't, Terry!" Irma spoke again, not quite distinctly, her face once more averted. "After all, Mr. Harkness has as much right as — as any other man — to . . . ."

"*Right?*" Terry's hands flashed out unexpectedly, and gripped her shoulders. She tried to free herself, but he held her fast.

"Right? The right of a bank account as swelled as his own head! The right of a man who has only to put his hand in his pocket and buy what he wants! By the holy Saint Patrick! But I'd like to be telling him what I think about his 'right,' this very minute. I would so!"

Irma laughed again, shakily this time. "Oh, Terry! You fiery, inconsequent, illogical person! Mr. Harkness's wealth, his ability to purchase wherever his fancy may lie, does not, surely, debar him from asking a woman to marry him?"

"But *you!* I can't think how he had the nerve, the colossal cheek! . . . *You!* You're miles above him; you're above any man if it comes to that. But for Kyrle Harkness to aspire to you! He's not even a gentleman!"

"Terry!" Irma's voice was softly rebuking. Under the grip of his hands she stirred; then she went on before he could speak again: "It's not fair to say that, Terry. Mr. Harkness, since I have known him, has never behaved as other than a gentleman. If he is not really of our world, he has never, on any occasion, made the fact undesirably evident. There is

nothing in the slightest degree objectionable about him. No man could have been more kind, or nice, or — or delicate."

Terry's fingers tightened until she winced beneath them. "Good Heavens! To hear you talk one would be thinking that you're condoning the fellow! That — *Irma!*" He bent quickly closer, striving to see into her face. Over his own there passed the shadow of a new doubt, a devastating fear. "Irma! You don't mean that you're thinking seriously of his proposal?"

Irma made a hasty gesture of denial. "No, no! Only, I can't, in fairness, listen to you saying things that are really unjust. I do not doubt for one moment that Mr. Harkness's social aspirations have a great deal to do with his desire to make me his wife. But he cares, too. It's that which worries me."

"Why?" Terry's voice was unwontedly harsh. His eyes, narrowed, still strove to search hers, unavailingly.

Irma lifted her hands helplessly, and let them fall. "Were it only a question of acquiring a higher standing in society, he might not persist unduly. But since he cares too . . . Terry, Kyrle Harkness is a man

who is in the habit of getting what he wants, somehow. My refusal to marry him may have hurt his pride, his self-esteem — but it will not deter him. He as good as told me that he had no intention of regarding 'no' as an answer."

"Like his infernal impudence!"

Irma shook her head. "No. It was not impudence. It was not even said in a manner that I could resent. I think — somehow — I'd rather it had been. It would have made the situation more definite."

"Good Lord! Isn't it definite enough now? See here, sweetness, if that chap pesters you at all, just let me know, and I'll put the fear of the Lord into him, some way or other. I won't have it, Irma! Isn't it bad enough to be in the divil of a position that I'm in now — loving you with every breath of my body and every beat of my heart — and without the face to stand up before the world and say so, and claim you, and run off with you, because I'm pretty well as poor as any beggar whining at a street corner, with never a prospect of being anything else!" He let his hands fall, and straightened himself stiffly. There was an unboyish grimness in the set

lines of his face, a great yearning beneath the restless dissatisfaction of his eyes.

"It's devilish!" he broke out again, speaking low, but with a fierce force behind the words. "Here am I loving you, and you loving me, and this sort of thing can happen — another man chipping in and fashing you with his attentions — and me having to stand by with my mouth shut, and put up with it, just because I've chucked away all the money I ever did have, and never qualified to make myself fit to earn any more. Why do folks bring their kids up as I was brought up, anyway? Just because you're rich, it doesn't follow you're going to stay that way — not if you've the inclinations my family had, and passed along to me!" He paused for breath.

Again Irma smiled in spite of herself. There was the warmth of a great tenderness in her eyes, a wistful understanding and regret. "Poor Terry! Oh, my dear, what a curse money is, both the possession and the lack of it! — There!" She changed her tone quickly, shook herself with a great effort out of her mood of depression and uncertainty, and smiled at him. "Let's stop worrying, and think of happier things! I was a goose, and

abominably selfish, to start grousing, but sometimes — sometimes one just has to. And I've had a trying day, one way or another."

"Poor kiddy!" Terry's voice softened to a note that brought tears to Irma's eyes.

As he stretched his arms to her, she stood away from him, laying just the tips of her fingers upon his extended palms. "Don't make love any more to me, Terry — not to-night, dear!" she pleaded. "It makes things so much harder — for us both."

Terry opened his lips, and closed them again. For a while he stood, looking down at the white fingers curled about his. Then, unexpectedly, only just above his breath, but with a fierce passion that startled her, he began to speak again: "God! Irma! What wouldn't I give to be able to start fair again! To drag myself out of the mire of debt into which I have deliberately, and with my eyes open, cast myself! To face life *free!* I'd work, Irma — if only for a miserable pittance, I'd work, and work, until I'd made some sort of a way for myself — and for you! But I can't get clear! I *can't!*" His voice broke oddly.

Again into the girl's eyes there swept that

look of tenderness, of yearning pity — a look unconsciously maternal, very sweet. She gave her hands to him fully, and impulsively Terry bent his head to kiss them.

"I feel such a worthless cumberer of the earth, Irma! Such a sorry figure of a man! I've health, and strength by far above the average, yet here I am, an idler, a gambler, with not one day of good hard honest labour to my credit. I never felt quite like this before — before I met you. I didn't *think* how I was wasting the gifts the gods have given me. I didn't realize the utter uselessness of my existence. I thought myself a rich man's son until the poor old pater died and I woke up to the fact that for years he had been living on his capital, royally, giving me no smallest hint of the true state of affairs, leaving me blissfully ignorant of the fact that there would be practically nothing left when he was gone, and that it would be up to me to get me a living by some means or another. He'd gambled, recklessly, sublimely confident of winning back all that he had lost. And his blood is in my veins. I had gambled, too — careless, really, whether or not I won. When I discovered the truth — that I was

poor, instead of rich — I continued to gamble, but on a larger scale. Like the pater, I was confident of winning. Instead, I always lost!"

He lifted his head and looked at her shadowy profile. "But you know all that, Irma; I told you long ago. How I parted with the little the pater left; how I've got into debt time after time, and borrowed to pay those debts at an interest that has spelled ruin . . . absolute ruin!"

"Terry!" Irma spoke sharply, and the boy, dropping her hands, turned suddenly away.

"It amounts to that, doesn't it?" he asked, very low, half sullenly, yet with such a bitter despair that she caught her breath. "I can't meet my debts — I can't meet my debts . . . God knows what will be the end of it all!"

"Terry!" The word was a frightened whisper.

He wheeled swiftly about and caught her to him again. "What a brute I am!" he cried contritely. "Worrying you, when you have worry enough of your own. But, oh, my dear! Every day I want you more. Every day I realize that I am putting myself further out of reach of you — and that the

fault is my own! That I have only my own damned folly to thank!"

"Oh, Terry!" Irma whispered. "Oh, Terry . . . Terry . . ."

He held her closer, kissing her hair in the darkness. "Dear heart! And when my thoughts are of the blackest" — he went on eagerly—"then I remember that you love me! Then, it seems to me, there can be nothing really wrong with the scheme of things, after all! The little old world's going round and round, and the jolly old sun is shining! And, sure, heart of my heart" — the old, optimistic Terry was speaking now — "it's going on shining, for us, in spite of the debts, and the duns, and the difficulties in our path. The divil take the lot of 'em, say I!"

Irma laughed. Terry's grip of her tightened. He put a finger beneath her chin and tipped her face up.

"A kiss will make a new man of me, sweetness!" he declared; and unresisting, smiling, but with the tears in her eyes, she gave her lips to his. When she drew away, she was still smiling, unsteadily. Terry in this mood always swept her off her feet, carried her out of herself, made her remember that they were

young, with the world before them, and very wonderfully in love. She stood without speaking, and after a moment Terry said, sobering again:

"What's Dudley think about — this Harkness business?"

Irma frowned. "He — Dud — knows I don't like Kyrle Harkness. He knows that he is paying me attention . . ." She stopped, hesitated, and added quickly: "Dudley can't do anything, Terry. I mean, to begin with, he doesn't quite realize —yet — that you and I *seriously* care. You're his best friend; I don't think it occurs to him that I'm grown up! When father or mother utter disapproving things regarding your — your friendship with me, Dud just laughs, in that big, indulgent way of his, and — more or less politely — tells them not to be idiotic." She slid a slim hand into his. "He doesn't understand. If he did, he couldn't help. He's the dearest brother in the world, generous to a fault — but he can't work miracles. The family is poor. Dudley isn't poor, because of inheriting a maiden aunt's modestly substantial fortune, and because he works, and makes money out of those plays and stories of his . . . Ye

gods! Imagine a Farrance working, *and* making money!" She pulled her fingers away, shrugging. "He helps. But he doesn't realize what a mess father and mother have made of things. I'm not going to enlighten him. Certainly they are not — they are just a bit scared of Dudley. And then, he has his own life to live. It wouldn't be fair to worry him with my troubles."

"But he's your brother!" Terry exploded hotly.

"I know. And he'd do anything in the world for me. But, as I say, he can't work miracles. Besides" — she laughed with a sudden, sympathetic softness — "he's absorbed in his own affair of the heart just at present. It strikes me that my fond brother is going to find himself in much the same boat as myself! Father'd drop dead of apoplexy if he imagined Dud was seriously in love with this bewilderingly pretty Lola Arnaut person."

"Is he?" Terry's interest was immediately aroused.

Irma nodded. "I think so. When I first met her, I didn't think so. I thought he just admired her, as he admires every really pretty woman he meets. And I wasn't surprised.

She didn't strike me as having anything more *lovable* — not really lovable, you know — than her beauty. But to-day she was different; quite different. I don't know how, but she appealed to me; I liked her. I could understand Dudley liking her — and more than liking her. Personally, I've decided that Lola Arnaut is a girl I'd like to see a good deal more of. She's puzzling, and fascinating, and intriguing . . . There's the gong! Terry, you've got to go!" She pushed him before her to the door.

At it he paused and caught her wrists lightly. "Irma! You do love me? You'll always love me?" There was a half-scared pleading in his deep young voice that made her think of a small, small boy, begging reassurance, comfort, and her throat contracted. Impulsively she reached up and, catching him by the lapels of his coat, drew him close, tilting her face up to his.

"Always!" she assured him. "Always — always — *always!*" And added, under her breath, when the door had closed upon him, her hands over her eyes — "Always! — whatever happens! . . ."

XIII

Outside the Farrances' house Terry stood hesitant, gloom once more descending upon him. The touch of those absurdly small, beautifully shaped hands of Irma's still thrilled him, but while his eyes were tender at the recollection they were sombre too.

His thoughts were not happy ones. A consuming jealousy of Kyrle Harkness possessed him, and a queer, indefinable fear. Irma's mood had left him strangely chilled. Her announcement of Harkness's proposal had enraged him — but it had frightened him too. Her defence of the other man Terry found even more alarming. Yet he knew it to be just. Kyrle Harkness might be of lower birth than themselves, he might be a social climber, but there was nothing vulgar in his make-up. His ease of manner might be veneer, but there was the charm of a kindly nature beneath it. Ambitious, he was; quite probably hard. But that hardness showed not at all in his intercourse with those whom he called friends and acquaintances. As a

companion he was pleasant, unostentatious, and perfectly self-possessed. He had a full appreciation of his own importance, but he did not exaggerate it, nor was he in the slightest degree overbearing. Altogether he was very likeable, and not at all of the type of *nouveaux riches* dear to the hearts of the caricaturists.

These facts, Terry was shrewd enough to realize, made him the more dangerous as a rival. Irma did not like the man, he knew. But, in the face of his good qualities, she could not, reasonably, acutely dislike him.

Swinging down the street, the boy laughed rather bitterly. An optimist born, to-night he was almost wearily pessimistic. Had he not been so sure of Irma's love, he would have regarded Harkness as a rival truly formidable, especially under such circumstances.

Terry had been Dudley Farrance's friend — perhaps his best friend — for years. Irma he had known since her flapper stage, and had loved her from the moment she had boxed his ears in repayment of his first audacious kiss. He knew the Farrances' position much as he knew his own. They had never been rich. Now, frankly, they were poor. The

elder Farrance was an irritable, sharp-tempered man, dictatorial and impatient. Of late years he had been suffering from a condition of health that made it necessary for those about him to give in to his least whim, lest a sudden seizure, following shock, or anger, or over-excitement, should result in his death.

His wife was a querulous woman, obstinately, if plaintively, determined to have her way with her kin, if not with the world at large, and with a very great opinion of her own importance. Husband and wife were reckless of money where the upkeep of their position was concerned. They not only expected, but intended, that each of their children should make a brilliant match. To this end Mrs. Farrance, at any rate, gave her days, all her time and thought; dressed herself and her daughter exquisitely, artistically, and expensively; entertained, and was entertained, outwardly aloof, charmingly gracious, apparently haughtily indifferent to the match-making going on about her. Within, she was as consumed by eagerness as any fond mother angling for a matrimonial fish. But she had found Irma, like her son, somewhat

unsatisfactory bait. Brother and sister had ideas of their own, which did not agree with the ideas and dogmas of their parents. Dudley, enraged and indignant at his mother's constant efforts to interest him in only the wealthy unmarried girls of their circle, and made superbly independent by a not unsubstantial legacy from a relative whose existence he had forgotten, had set up housekeeping for himself in bachelor luxury, and concentrated upon achieving a measure of literary prominence, not without success.

Under such circumstances he might be termed wealthy; but Fate had not been so kind to his sister. These things Terry knew, and had known for a long time. His own position he had made plain in his late interview with Irma — and many times previously. His father, a gambler born, had played ducks and drakes with all of his income and most of his capital. His son, bitten by the same fever, had, upon inheriting it, dissipated the scant remainder of that capital. He was, almost literally, penniless. And Kyrle Harkness, the millionaire, was suitor for the hand of the girl he loved.

The boy was in a black mood, and at a

loose end. And then, unexpectedly, his thoughts drifted to Lola Arnaut. After a moment of thought, he hailed a taxi and gave her address. The woman, Sally, admitted him to the flat. He lifted his brows in surprise as he bade her good evening.

"Not gone, Sally?" he questioned. "Miss Arnaut got a party on?"

Sally shook her head and took his hat and stick. "No, sir. More like an attack of nerves. All on the jump, she's been, ever since she pulled off that contract with Mr. Van Bevan! Can't make her out, I can't. Doesn't seem to know where she is or what she's doin', half the time."

She jerked a thumb towards the closed door of the sitting-room. "She's in there, readin'. *Readin'!* Her as hardly ever picked a book up in a week. But me bein' here's owin' to her seemin' so queer I thought she was goin' to be ill, and I suggested stayin' overnight. Jumped at it, she did, so I'm livin' in, now. Rather like it, 'specially as she seems to have forgotten her tantrums! Extraordinarily changed, she is, Mr. Terry, sir. You wouldn't believe."

She chuckled suddenly. "Lor', but she's

been playin' a fine old game with the lot of us, an' no mistake. Can't make it out, myself; but I take off my hat to her for a bloomin' wonder! Talk about lyin' low and waiting for your chance. She's been lyin' low, all right. Not been wasting any energy on an indifferent show, Miss Lola hasn't. Reckon folks'll sit up and take notice when the Van Bevan show opens . . . Go right in, sir."

Terry obeyed. Binny, on a cushion by the fire, a suède-covered book on her knee, her face intent and rather pale, looked up quickly at his entrance, such surprise in her eyes that he halted.

"Just ran in to be cheered up!" he explained. "Got a fit of the blues, and want to be made happy. Didn't hope to catch you in, but if you're not doing anything else, come and have dinner with me, there's a dear soul!"

He took her rather limp hand and smiled at her. Then he went across to the mantelpiece, and stood ruffling and smoothing his hair alternately. Binny looked at him, frowning and perplexed. It had become evident, unexpectedly, that this young man was also on

terms of friendship with her, and, recovering her poise, hastily reminding herself that she was Lola Arnaut and not Binny Clay, she got to her feet.

"What's up?" she inquired. If surprised, she was frankly interested; unconsciously, looking at the bent red head, her voice warmed to sympathy.

Terry, instantly conscious of it, swung round, throwing out his hands. "Everything!" he announced. "Every darn thing that *can* be wrong! I — I'm feeling right down murderous, to-night, Lola! I'd like to pound quite a lot of people to a jelly, but there's one person in particular I could kill outright, in cold blood!"

"O — oh!" Binny opened wide eyes. "Who's that?" she demanded.

Terry was rumpling his hair again. "A mysterious, cheating divil who's making a fortune by thieving other folks' money," he retorted. "Name of Clay!" He looked up at Binny's gasp, and added, savagely: "Benny Clay!"

XIV

Binny, gasping audibly, caught at the back of the chair from which she had risen, and sank weakly into it again. Every vestige of colour had fled from her cheeks. Her eyes, wide and dark with amaze and apprehension, clung to Terry's. She felt suddenly cold; she was utterly bewildered and taken aback. She made no attempt to speak. Speech at that moment was quite beyond her. She moistened dry lips with the tip of her tongue, and waited, dumbly.

Terry, with scarcely a glance at her, and supremely unaware of her agitation, had begun to stride up and down the room. His big form seemed to fill it, and Binny watched him, fascinated.

"Of all the blood-suckers," he proceeded forcefully, "Benny Clay's the worst. Once you're in his clutches, you can never get out of them again! He's got the strangle-hold of an octopus! The appetite of a shark. The — the —" He broke off.

Binny was making queer little hysterical sounds which were nearer tears than laughter.

She controlled herself as she met his astonished glance. "He!" — she echoed — "He! — Benny Clay . . . Was it *Benny* Clay you said, or — or —" She brought herself up short.

Terry waved his hands, slightly puzzled, but still too deeply absorbed in his own troubles to be more than passingly so. "Yes. Benny Clay. Benjamin Clay; the money-lender, you know!"

Binny expelled a long, deep breath. An immense relief enveloped her; she began to laugh again, almost idiotically, it seemed to her. The conjunction of the name of Clay with another so remarkably like her own as "Benny," and spoken of in such terms as Terry had just used, had given her a real shock. She still felt a little hysterical, but that faint perplexity in Terry's eyes warned her to be on guard. When at last she spoke, it was more or less steadily.

"No, I don't know —" She stopped short again.

Terry's eyes had flashed up; he looked at her wonderingly. "Not? Thought I heard Gustav grousing to you furiously the other night about him."

A flicker of uneasiness crossed Binny's face. She turned it quickly away. "Was he? I didn't notice. I" — there was the faintest possible note of grimness in her voice, a subtle suggestion of distaste that made Terry look at her again — "I don't always listen to what Mr. De Mille says."

This time Terry's brows disappeared up beneath the fringe of red hair he had ruffled down onto his forehead. "Mr. De Mille!" He echoed. "By George, Lola, since when this thusness? Thought you and Gustav were thick as thieves — pals of the palliest, don't you know!"

Binny winced ever so slightly, and into her hidden eyes there leaped a flame — a glow of bitter anger against the person in question — a glint of angry fear, swept away a moment later by a passion of pity for that woman who had, indeed, been "thick as thieves" with De Mille, and, as far as Binny was able to conclude, literally as well as figuratively.

"Thought you couldn't do without De Mille at any price — that you depended upon him for all your accompaniments and coaching . . ."

"*Me?*" Binny flashed half-indignant eyes

upon him, and then, remembering herself in time, shrugged and smiled. There had been nothing offensive or impertinent in O'Farrer's comments and questions, just a boyish surprise and curiosity.

Binny made a little, half-apologetic movement of her hands. "Not so much," she observed guardedly — "as perhaps folks have thought . . ." She hesitated.

Terry paused in front of her, momentarily forgetful of himself and his worries in the interest she had roused. He had never liked De Mille; like Farrance he had regretted the intimacy which existed between Lola and the man who seemed to have with her an undue influence.

"Have you and De Mille quarrelled, then?" he demanded. His tone was so hopeful that Binny smiled irrepressibly, flickering a swift, searching glance over him.

She was wondering how old might be the evident friendship between herself and this big, clumsy, awkward boy, with his blue eyes and oddly charming manner. She shook her head slowly. "Oh — no. Only things are very different now, you see. I mean, Van Bevan's show is quite a different affair from Scarlossi's."

Terry grinned. "I'll say it is! I say, Lola, I haven't properly congratulated you yet, but I'm no end glad you've got this chance. And — and that old Van Bevan's so pleased. I couldn't believe Dudley when he told me you'd made such an impression that you've got little Lottie What's-her-name's place! I'm not altogether certain that I believe it now. Er — I mean, you know, you've never taken a really big part before, have you?"

Binny smiled at him, a slow, glowing smile that warmed and lighted her whole face. "No," she agreed. "Like you, I find it difficult to believe."

"And you don't funk it?" Terry's voice was frankly amazed. He was looking at her with new curiosity and interest, the puzzlement growing in his gaze.

She felt it, and flushed, shaking her head. "No. I know I can do what Mr. Van Bevan wants — *and* Mr. Dallas. Listen!"

She got up abruptly and went to the piano. Upon the rack stood a song, open. A pile of new music was on the top of the piano. Binny touched a chord, hesitantly, lightly. She had never, in all her drab days, had any chance to learn, even sketchily, the intrica-

cies of that much-abused instrument, but the latent love of music in her soul made it possible for her to improvise an incorrect though adequate accompaniment to any song she wanted to sing.

"This is 'Daisies,'" she told Terry, over her shoulder. "The song they made such a fuss about. I'd sing the new ones, but I can't accompany myself . . ."

She bit her lip sharply at the confession. Rather hastily, before the boy, sauntering towards her, could answer, she began to sing. Abruptly, halfway towards her, Terry stopped. He muttered something indistinctly, and waited. When she had finished, she turned to him, her lips apart, half-nervous questioning in her eyes.

Terry was smoothing his red hair as earnestly and effectively as before he had ruffled it. Making no comment at all, he sat down upon the cushioned bench before the piano.

"Let's have a shot at the others," he suggested. "If they're not too tricksy, I dare say I'll manage, and if I can't I'll improvise. You're usually gracious enough to say I make a fairly good substitute for our friend Gustav

— though, I admit, not when you were aspiring to Ivo Dallas's music. Here goes!"

Binny shot him a sharp glance, opened her lips, and then, instead of speaking, began to sing again. Terry O'Farrer was an amateur of no mean ability. Binny, watching his strong, sensitive, rather beautiful hands flying over the keys, had further reason for reflection and surprise. In a moment the flat was ringing with the sound of their combined efforts, and in the kitchen Sally threw her hands to Heaven and demanded of Providence what miracle had befallen the world during the last few days.

"Bewitched, and that's what she is!" she proclaimed, her head on one side. "The devil or the fairies have got into her, and no mistake about that. . . . O-oh, la-la . . . . la-la-la . . . . la-la — la-ah!"

Inspired by the melody and the ring of Binny's young voice, Sally, secure behind the kitchen door, indulged in a voice-trial of her own. In the sitting-room Binny, rapidly becoming lost in the spell of Dallas's tricksy, catchy, oddly haunting music, first swayed as she sang, then began to dance. Over his shoulder, happily swept clear away from his

previous gloomy reflections, Terry watched her. He stopped playing so abruptly that the girl stumbled in her step, and faced him, panting, questioning, slender arms still uplifted.

Terry took his hands off the keys and stood up. "No wonder you knocked 'em flat the other night!" he commented drily. "If you can keep that sort of thing up, Lola, you'll be what is termed 'The sensation of the season!' The point is — can you? If so — why the dickens have you maundered through every performance you've ever given like a lovely sugar-stick?"

Binny grinned. It was a gamin-like grin, such as Terry had never seen distorting the red lips of Lola Arnaut, and it took him somewhat aback. On her part, Binny was flushed, once more triumphant, free of nervous tremors. She found Terry O'Farrer stimulating. Once more, heart and soul, she hurled herself, enthusiastically, into the part that Fate had assigned to her.

" 'Cos," she asserted, nodding, "I like to get folks guessing! Perhaps partly, too, because I'm constitutionally — lazy!"

This time Terry grinned. "Lazy — noth-

ing!" he declared. "You're a witch, that's what you are, Lola! Or else you're bewitched. I wouldn't like to be quite sure."

Binny let her arms drop. She looked at him queerly out of eyes that had lost their light. Then she shook herself and laughed. "Bewitched — that's it!" she assured him. "Utterly, absolutely, and completely bewitched!"

Terry regarded her radiant face earnestly, aware of a subtle change in her that was somehow startling, but to which he could give no name, which he could not possibly define. He asked, abruptly, and with far more caution than he usually evinced: "But — is the bewitchment going to last?"

Binny grew instantly sober. She looked past him, at nothing, her eyes contracting, her lips close shut. Then: "I don't know!" she confessed. "Does bewitchment ever last? But — but — I do know that I'm going to carry this thing through. *I'm going to!* I'm going to work as I've never worked in my life — "

"I believe you," Terry interpolated irrepressibly; but she ignored him.

"I'm going to make a success. Not one

success, but many. I'm going to climb, up and up and up! The chance of my life has come to me and — I've grabbed it!" She flashed a sudden gleaming look at him, her slender body tense. "I'm going to hang on to it. Hang on until I've got where nobody can pull me down; nobody can take from me that which I've gained for myself! I'm going to make a place in the world that nobody, and *nothing*, can wrest from me . . ." She broke off short, breathing rather quickly. The rose was deep in her cheeks, her eyes were like stars.

Terry looked at her for several seconds in complete silence. "Sure!" he declared—"and I believe you! You're that changed, Lola Arnaut, that your own mother wouldn't know you, coming on you suddenly, as you are now. It's meself believes the divil's in it, I do so!"

Binny drew a quick, hard breath. Then she laughed. It was a short, strangely unmusical little laugh, and her hand went for a minute to her breast. "Maybe," she said after a pause, slowly — "maybe — he is!"

"By the same token," Terry remarked, cheerfully, if not complimentarily, "what does our friend Gustav think about it all?"

Binny made an abrupt, rather violent movement of impatience; again distaste, something of distress and uneasiness, showed in her eyes. "I don't know!" she returned shortly, "and — I don't care!" There was a defiance in the declaration that suggested it was not altogether truthful. Binny herself was wondering — and had been wondering for some time — as to the state of De Mille's mind. She had, however, carefully and skilfully avoided finding out by meeting him, so far.

The thought of him scared her a little, made her nervous. But it deterred her not one whit in her determination to go through with her part, to the very end, whatever that end might be. Nor did her dread of the man shake her implacable loathing of him; her grim decision to make him suffer, and, when the time should be ripe, to bring him to book for the crime that he had committed.

But she did not want to think about him

more frequently than was absolutely necessary; certainly not now. She hinted as much pretty plainly, adding swiftly: "You came to ask me to go to dinner with you, and to assist in ridding you of a fit of 'blue devils.' I'd love to come to dinner, but I mustn't be late — and I'd like to go somewhere very quiet, where — where I shan't meet people I know! I — I'm getting rather nervy. And rehearsals start Monday. Is there somewhere we can go so I do not need to dress? I could come right away, if so, and you could pour out your woes to me over dinner."

Terry agreeing, she disappeared, to return less than ten minutes later, a close-fitting toque on her head and a fur coat wrapped about her.

Terry regarded her curiously. "Do you know," he said, as they passed out of the flat and into the street, "enthusiasm is making you prettier! I've never seen you with so much colour! If you're going to add increased beauty to unexpected talent, my dear, there's no doubt of your success."

Binny flushed more warmly, her eyes asparkle.

Hailing a taxi, Terry put her in. He said,

as he seated himself by her side: "And what's the idea, having Sally to live in, now? You are an incomprehensible person, Lola, my child! Only a few days ago you were declaring she got on your nerves, and that you hated a servant on top of you all the time, knowing exactly who came and went, and prying into your affairs. And now — "

"Now I've changed my mind!" Her tone was conclusive.

Terry hunched his broad shoulders and laughed. Throughout dinner he kept her amused, but as they were drinking coffee, she interrupted some idle remark, leaning nearer to him.

"What's been bothering you?" she asked. "Over this — this Benjamin Clay, I mean. You wanted to tell me?"

Terry put down his cup slowly, his face clouding. The light went out of his eyes, the laughter from his lips. Binny watched him closely, and presently he made a nervous movement of his big hands.

"Oh — it's nothing. I mean, nothing in which you can help me. I oughtn't to have spoken of it — bothered you. Only — you've always been pretty nice to me, Lola; really a

chum — sympathetic, and all that! And I felt I wanted sympathy — some one to grouse to. To tell you the truth, I'm divilish miserable . . . ." He paused, staring sombrely into his cup.

Binny did not speak at once. She was assimilating the knowledge that she and this big boy were friends, and that he was, apparently, accustomed to come to her for sympathy in some of his troubles, at any rate. Not yet sure of her ground, she said at last: "What's this Benjamin Clay man got to do with it?"

"Everything! At least, nearly everything. If I'd not been fool enough to get into his clutches, I shouldn't be in the hole I am in now! I'm up to my ears in debt, and getting deeper every minute. I've borrowed from this man Clay at heavy interest — iniquitously heavy interest. I've been mad, of course, but I've always hoped my luck'd change — that some gamble or game or race would make me a winner, and set me on my feet! Instead, I've always lost! And now . . . ." He stopped. Suddenly, disturbingly, his young face looked very drawn and haggard; in his eyes was a fleeting look almost of desperation.

Binny made a movement of her hand. She was a warm-hearted little person, naturally sympathetic, and while she had actually known Terry O'Farrer a mere matter of hours, she could understand readily that the real Lola had liked him; that every one must like him. Also she was intrigued and interested by his confession, conscious of a new, pleasureable sense of importance, of a genuine pity for him.

"Poor boy!" she said, and there was an odd, maternal note in her voice that made him look up at her gratefully, comforted. "Can't you go and see this Benjamin Clay person and — and talk things over with him? Ask him to — to wait, or something?"

Terry laughed shortly. "My dear child! No one has ever seen Benjamin Clay. He's perhaps one of the biggest money-lenders in England, the richest and the most unscrupulous. He's hard to the core, and absolutely merciless. But these things I've heard, or know from experience. I've never seen him; as far as I can gather, no one else has — not Benjamin Clay himself. Of course there are confidential men in his employ with whom one has necessary business interviews; but

Clay is never there, or, if he is, he's never seen. Not that an interview would make the slightest difference!"

Binny looked at him shrewdly. He met her gaze and smiled crookedly.

"I oughtn't to have bothered you. It's not as if you could help. And moaning about what I've brought to pass with my own crass folly isn't going to help matters."

"Then what's going to happen?"

Terry put down his coffee-cup with a crash. He looked older, grown haggard and drawn. Between Binny's radiant figure and himself there rose a vision of Irma. He bit back a groan, and signalled to the waiter.

"God knows!" he said, heavily. "Let's go!"

A little over an hour later, Binny was alone once more in her flat, drawn close to the sitting-room fire, a rose-shaded light above her head, Lola Arnaut's suède-bound diary in her hands. Out in the kitchen Sally was ponderously moving about, and the girl drew a sigh. However Lola may have felt towards Sally, she was conscious of a sense of security at the woman's presence; moreover, she was

coming to the decision that Sally might have her faults, but that she had excellent qualities as well. Added to which much of the information Binny had gleaned from her in the last two days was exceedingly useful.

She did not open the diary at once, but sat staring into the fire, her thoughts a jumble of the present, the past, and the future. Her own audacity frightened her; nevertheless, she was not without a triumphant sense of increasing sureness of her position as she surmounted each new difficulty. Already she was sinking her identity more and more certainly into that of her dead sister, without finding it necessary to relinquish, wholly, her own personality.

She sighed at last, and turned the first page of the closely written book. The date above the first entry was of about two years previous.

Have decided to keep a diary. So much to write about since papa took me to Paris. Wish we'd never had to come back. After Paris even New York seems dull, and we shan't be here more than another two weeks. Have been taking fresh lessons in singing, and just joined a new dancing class. . . . I'm a stick at dancing, *and* singing. I can tell by the expression of Signor D'Avaglia's face when he's teaching me. It's

rather vexing, especially as I love the stage so. I believe papa's glad. In fact, I'm sure he is. He *hates* the stage, and everything to do with it. I wonder why?

I went to Maudie Keen's studio last evening to a little party. Maudie paints beautifully, and says she means to continue with it professionally, even though she is the daughter of fearfully wealthy people. . . . They've rented her a perfectly glorious studio. . . . It was great fun. Quite a lot of well-known professional people were there, singers and artists and actors. I loved it. Maudie says I look as though I'm just cut out for the stage, and I believe I am. Two or three people said so too, and of course I have got looks. I wonder what my mother was like. She died when I was born, and papa never speaks of her, and there are no pictures.

I met a man, towards the end of the evening, who fascinated me fearfully. His name's De Mille — Gustav De Mille.

Binny put the book down on her knees, her eyes dilating ever so slightly. Gustav De Mille. Involuntarily, at the mere thought of the name, the man, she shivered. Presently she read on:

Mr. De Mille's delightful. He never took his eyes off me all evening, after Maudie introduced us. . . . He said he thought at first I was on the stage, and wondered I wasn't.

He said with my looks I'd make a terrific stir, and he didn't sound as if he was just flattering, like some of the others. . . . He saw me home. I believe it wouldn't be at all difficult to fall in love with him; he's most fascinating. . . .

Of course he doesn't belong to our set. I was talking to papa about him, and he seemed not at all pleased. . . . Papa's dreadfully old-fashioned.

Mr. De Mille called the other day. Papa saw him. He wasn't favourably impressed, and he wants me not to see any more of him. . . . I call it unkind and unreasonable.

We're going back home a week earlier than we'd arranged. I believe because papa wants to get me away from these "stage folk" as he calls them. I do think it's too bad. Lakefield's the dullest spot in the whole of New England, I do believe — and every one within miles is a frump! I don't know how I shall bear it.

Saw Mr. De Mille the day before we left New York. He asked if he might write, and of course I said, "Yes." He brought me some perfectly lovely American Beauties.

I rather fancy I've fallen in love with him. . . . In fact, I'm *sure* I have! . . .

Sally appeared suddenly at the door. Behind her the telephone was ringing furiously.

"I expect," the woman announced with

marked disapproval, "that's Mr. De Mille on the 'phone again. He rang you three times while you were out. He wants to come round. What'll I say if it is him?"

Binny closed the diary quickly and moved with it to the desk. Then she changed her mind and came back to the fire. Her face was rather pale, but there was a curious, growing, hard light in her eyes. She stood for a moment, the book held up against her breast. Then she dropped back into her chair. "Tell him I'll see him in half an hour," she said.

XVI

During that half-hour Binny continued assiduously to peruse the diary, reading rapidly, but with extreme care, missing no detail that might be of importance. The expression of her down-bent, earnest face changed many times as the clearly written words passed before her; from interest to pity, from pity to anger, from anger to impatience, wonderment, scorn.

Lola Arnaut had been, apparently, a young person whose days were very idle, and she had spent a great part of them in putting down many of her thoughts on paper, and every trivial happening. Her story was as clear to Binny as if she had heard it from the dead girl's own lips. And perhaps she came to feel the strong tie of their relationship more impressively than she would ever have felt it had she come in touch with Lola while living. In any case, even that short half-hour's reading put her in possession of facts which were invaluable, and the knowledge of which strengthened her position so greatly that such

nervousness and panic as had remained with her until now was rapidly passing away.

It was a human little document, this diary, a revelation of Lola's nature and characteristics as much as of the events of her life. There were times when the tears rose to Binny's eyes, and she wished that she might have known this sister of hers, have given to the weaker nature that protection and understanding and guidance in the ways of a hard world which it had so sorely needed. Daughters of the same mother, they had been born under such utterly different circumstances, had grown to bloom of womanhood as apart as a sturdy, hardily reared geranium and a delicate, hothouse orchid. The orchid had withered and died upon transplantation. The geranium had survived, and was taking on new bloom and new strength in finer soil.

The first part of the diary was almost solely given up to Lola's impressions of Paris, to which, apparently, her father had recently taken her, and to descriptions of her New England surroundings, which suffered sadly in comparison with Paris and New York.

This place grows more dead alive every day. I never noticed it before I went to Paris, and to

New York, but now I'm unutterably bored. And papa can't understand. He's of another generation, and he loves the place. I don't believe he'd have taken me to Paris if he hadn't had to go on business, and thought a visit there was a necessary part of my education. He treats me like a child, still, and it irritates me so! I want to know if he thinks I'm going on living here forever? I'd stifle. I want life, light, laughter — I'm *beautiful!* Really beautiful. I know it; I can't help knowing it, and every one who looks at me tells me so.

I don't mean to be conceited. But I can't see wasting beauty like mine in a sleepy New England place like this. I wonder if mother was beautiful. I asked papa once. I know he never speaks of her if he can help it. I believe he loves her as much as the day she died, though that was when I was born! . . . and the pain of her loss is as great. He didn't answer at once. Then he said: "Yes. You are extraordinarily like her, except that your eyes are not so wonderful. Hers were so much less restless, so much more gentle. . . . Your mother had the loveliest eyes in the world! But when I told her so she laughed — just laughed, and assured me that every member of her family had eyes identical with hers, from the smallest and furthest removed cousin to the plainest great-aunt! She had a sense of humour, your mother — but I think she meant it."

Here Binny drew a deep breath, and her

own eyes, wonderful, changeful, dwelt for a long moment on the flames. There was a little lump in her throat and an ache at her heart. She had missed so much — she, and Lola, too, in never knowing that mother. So much of sweetness, so much to remember!

She shook herself, and turned the pages of the diary slowly, reading on:

I don't know why I've put all that down. I don't know why I should be writing of mother at all, just now — except that I'm lonely, and restless, and papa doesn't understand. He never has understood. If I hadn't been mother's child, he wouldn't care for me at all. He gave all the best of him to her; all his love — and she has it still! I wouldn't mind that, if he'd let me be a bit freer. . . . He's a dear, of course. He gives me everything any girl could want, except that which my blood is crying out for — change, life, laughter, admiration — *love!* I want all of it!

Again Binny looked at the fire. Again her throat contracted. She had felt the same — just the same. She had craved for love and light and laughter. Only she had had none of those things which had made Lola's life smooth. She had had to fight, all through life, like the veriest gutter cat or dog for

a bare living, to fend for herself with the odds of life against her, to break a way through to the sunshine.

Reading Lola's diary, she did not altogether regret it. Lola's description of the existence of a woman of ease and leisure and, obviously, wealth, was enlightening. It left much to be said, after all, for the rough-and-tumble manner in which she herself had attained to womanhood. Binny concluded that to have roughed it, literally, during the early days of young girlhood was a condition of things not to be despised. One's defences against the world and the people in it were so much more sure! In the vernacular of Binny's particular world, "Lola hadn't stood a dog's chance!"

And I'm going to have it — them, I mean. All of them. Pleasure, attention, success . . . and the only way I can see of getting them is going on the stage.

Of course father would have a fit at the mere suggestion. And I *do* know I haven't much real ability . . . but Maudie says I'd make a hit, and Gustav De Mille says I'd soon learn the ropes.

He's written several times; and once he's been quite close here. I saw him. I made an excuse

to go, and we had a ripping time — Gustav was accompanying for a troupe engaged by the management of a newly opening hotel. Gustav was delightful. He told me he is going over to England with a new show. . . . He begged me to join it. How I wish I could!

I really do love Gustav, and I'm sure — now — he loves me! I don't know — the whole world seems changed — topsy-turvy — wonderful!

"Poor kid!" The exclamation was heartfelt. With a sharp upward glance at the clock, Binny turned another page.

Gustav's going almost at once! I can't bear it! I can't bear to be left here . . . *I won't*. . . .

I've told papa I want to go on the stage. He's *furious*. He hates the stage. It appears my mother was on the stage for a little while. . . . I suppose that's why I love it so.

I've seen Gustav. I made an excuse to go to New York, for some shopping. He begs me to join the company, says he can get me a part. I'd love it — *love* it! And, after all, my life's my own. I want to go — I want to!

After this entry some considerable time must have elapsed, Binny decided. The next entry was undated, but it was made in England.

The last few weeks have been like some weird,

disturbing dream! I'd no idea people on the stage worked so hard. I ache in every limb ever since I've been in England! I hardly remember really what happened from the time I ran away. I took nothing but a few Paris frocks, and my jewels. They were my own, given to me every birthday, so I'd a right to them. Gustav is looking after them for me. He says they are worth quite a lot. . . .

Gustav has seemed much cooler of late. It appears I'm an awful stick. . . . And things are so expensive. Gustav had to sell nearly all the jewels, and says owing to the market he could only get a third of what he had expected. The stage isn't a bit what I thought. I could cry, sometimes — and these lodgings are so dingy.

I wrote to papa . . . I hadn't meant to, but I'm not used to having no money. He wrote back through his solicitors saying he never wishes to hear from me again. Also that he will not give me a farthing — ever; will never forgive me.

Another interval followed, another entry, hurriedly scrawled, after the lapse of several weeks.

I've been an utter fool. I can see it now. Only it's too late! I haven't any talent; I never shall have. I've only looks. And, as Gustav points out, nastily, looks aren't substantial enough for a lasting place on the stage.

Gustav is utterly changed. He's irritable and

nervy. He brings a lot of people to these rooms to play cards — people I don't like, and don't understand. . . . With the glamour off, the stage is a horrible place! I admit I was never meant to adorn it. And Gustav frightens me, sometimes. He's queer, down one minute, up the next, without a penny for weeks, and then affluent. Some of the people who come here are very rich. They are most of them men, but there are a few women. Some of the women have lovely jewels. I'm rather puzzled about that. Gustav sent me with a necklace to such a funny little man one day. He told me to shut up when I asked him where it had come from. He had been drinking, or I don't think he'd have let me know what I was taking to the man — anyway, we got a lot of money for it. And then, quite a fortnight later, one of the women was telling us all how she'd lost a necklace one night after we'd been playing here. . . . She'd made all sorts of inquiries, but it was never traced. Gustav gave her all sorts of good advice, but there was a funny look in his eyes. . . . *I'm frightened!*

Binny's lips compressed; her eyes were very bright. She turned so the light shone more fully on the writing in the book, less clear now, speaking of agitation in every uncertain character.

I believe I hate Gustav! I know now I never

loved him. It's all been glamour — glamour — glamour! But I've burned my boats, irrevocably. I've got to stick to it, right through to the bitter end — whatever the end may be, and, sometimes I wonder! Gustav doesn't care either. He never did. He saw a money-making proposition in me — thought papa'd come round, make things easy for me for life — he's said as much. And then, those jewels of mine were worth having . . . and my looks are still marketable, if we can find the right market! Gustav again, though I'm hard enough now to say very bitter things!

. . . Luck at last! Gustav introduced me to Scarlossi, of Scarlossi's Theatre! And I've made a hit! Scarlossi's enthusiastic; he hasn't so much an eye for talent as for looks! Makes it a habit to find the beauties, and star them, irrespective of their merits! He's starring me! *Me!* Lola Arnaut! I'm glad I took that name, it's so deliciously *French!* — And it seems to me that girls recruited from France, or Spain, or Italy are *so* much more attractive to the public than just English girls. . . . I mean, in England, of course. . . . The newspaper stuff is awfully amusing; Scarlossi's booming me hard. All about how I'm an American millionaire's daughter, with French blood in my veins, and ran away from home because I was tired of being idle! . . . Half of it piffle, of course, but some of it truth! I'm so excited! Perhaps, after all, everything will be well. Even Gustav is more like he used to be, and ever so bucked!

Scarlossi's going to give me a part, and a decent salary. . . . I've a flat of my own now. A duck? I'm being talked about everywhere, pictures in all the papers, and interviews! It's a duck — I've made it awfully luxurious, just the sort of a flat a star ought to have, I think — and a white cat!

I'm sorry now about the cat! They tell me white cats are unlucky! . . . Ugh! As if I hadn't been unlucky enough. . . . And I've a servant. Such an oddity — called Sally! I believe she's really a good-hearted person, but she gets on my nerves. Will "deary" me — at least, she did till I lost my temper and *raged* at her! I'm not used to servants who take liberties; but she's awfully efficient, though disgustingly curious! She was a dresser once, and since has been in service with actresses — so she knows the ropes. I'm sure she looks upon me as horribly stuck up, and unsympathetic, but I can't help it. . . . I was born to other things, and I oughtn't to have left them!

Binny grinned, suddenly and irrepressibly. Poor Sally. She was beginning now to understand much of that good woman's puzzlement. Her own cheery acceptance of Sally's rough-and-ready service must be so utterly different from Lola's aloof disapproval.

She wanted to live in, but I wouldn't have it.

I couldn't, very well — Gustav so often drinks, and brings such queer people here sometimes . . . and servants talk so abominably. I couldn't bear to know Sally was only a yard across the hall during these hateful card parties!

I still find the stage hard, though I've nothing much to do but look charming in perfectly gorgeous gowns! . . . Gustav brought two new men here the other night. One is called Terry O'Farrer — a great big chap, with the dearest, jolliest smile and a pair of positively melting Irish eyes in the most freckled face I've ever seen! He's an insatiable gambler, and *always* loses. At least—I've my doubts about that sometimes. . . . He's a real dear, and we've chummed up quite a lot. He's one of those irresponsible, impulsive, lovable people who *eat* sympathy. It appears he's head over heels in love — as well as in debt. The girl is the sister of the other man, Terry O'Farrer's best friend — Dudley Farrance. I think Dudley Farrance is the nicest man I've ever met. He's so clean, and so absolutely a gentleman. I can't imagine how Gustav came in contact with two men like these two boys. They're dears! It wouldn't be the least bit difficult to be fond of Terry, and more than fond of Dudley Farrance. . . .

Binny put a cool hand against a hot cheek. Her eyes warmed to something at once wistful, puzzled, and tender. She forced herself with something of an effort to read on deliber-

ately. The next entry was dated a month later.

Dudley Farrance is in love with me. Or thinks he is. As far as I'm concerned, I suppose it's all the same. He comes constantly here, but he's never said anything definite, yet. I suppose I oughtn't to encourage him — but it's good to have a man like that thinking nice things of one. I'm so tired of the other sort — however nice! So *tired* . . .

Terry comes and talks to me for hours about Dudley's sister. Her name's Irma, and at present she's not in England. But Dudley Farrance says she has seen my photograph, and when she comes back she is going to see me at the theatre — and that she wants to meet me! Lord! But it would be good to meet a woman of my own kind again! Poor Terry! His prospects appear hopeless. He's poor as a church mouse — and so are the Farrances . . . and Irma is a beauty, and a matrimonial catch. *Poor* Terry.

Gustav is drinking again. . . . I'm afraid of him, but I'm getting harder. I defy him sometimes, especially since I've found out what he is! A crook — a thief — a card cheat! . . . *Oh, God!* And he's dragged me into it — innocently enough — with him. It gives him such a hold on me — I couldn't break away if I tried, not unless I want to ruin myself. . . . I'd like to be dead, sometimes. I hate him — I *hate* him! It was he who stole that necklace — and a good many other

trifles! He's rooked Terry time and again — until I've tried to warn him! — Terry, I mean. It's awful! . . . I don't know what to do —

Binny's eyes widened, her fine nostrils dilated for a second, her lips twitched. For the next few pages there was nothing of interest. Then:

I've met Van Bevan! *The* Van Bevan! And — I suppose it's due to Dudley Farrance's influence — he's interested. There's just the possibility of getting a contract when I finish at Scarlossi's!

I've got it! . . . Or nearly. Gustav says it's as good as a certainty, if I can only look affluent enough! Affluent! . . . when all my rings even are paste, and Van Bevan has an eye like a Hatton Garden expert where jewels are concerned!

Oh! Ye gods of luck! I was telling that — about the jewels — to Dudley Farrance! And he's going to lend me some, heirlooms, worth a perfect pile of money. Enough to make his family rich again, though they dare not sell them. He's no right to do it, and it mustn't be known, but he's going to lend them to me — just to wear when I have my interview with Van Bevan — Gustav and I are going to supper with him — Van Bevan — after the show is over at Scarlossi's — the night before the closing night.

They've come. They are wonderful . . . I look like a princess in them!

Van Bevan was suitably impressed. I'm to go after the show to-morrow night to Delorme's to sign the contract! It's the chance of a lifetime! I've told Dudley I'll bring the case of jewels to him at the same time — he'll be there at Delorme's. He's sending his car for me to the theatre. . . . I'm *happy* to-night!

A horrible thing has happened. Gustav has Dudley Farrance's jewels. He said just to take care of them, but I'm afraid — afraid — *afraid!* Especially after this morning's news. A Lady Heilan, an immensely rich woman, has been robbed. It's made a sensation. And the other night I heard Gustav whispering to the funny little man I took the first necklace to — he comes here sometimes with Gustav, though I hate him! They were alone that night. And I'd a headache. I went to bed and left them talking. But I came out for some milk, in my slippers, and I heard what they said, though they didn't know. It was something about an "easy crib" — a "magnificent haul," and then "her ladyship" and "Heilan House." . . .

It must be the same. I feel half crazy! But I'm crazier at the thought of Farrance's jewels. Gustav will have to give them back. He *shall* — or I'll fling everything to the devil, in sheer desperation, and split — whatever the consequences! Dudley's been so straight and so good! . . .

The doorbell rang. Binny stood up

abruptly. For a minute, with eyes ablaze, exultation, triumph, and a new, unshakable confidence in herself, she waited. Then she went hurriedly to the desk, locked the diary in it, and, turning as the door opened, advanced, very deliberately, to meet Gustav De Mille.

XVII

De Mille came in quickly. He was obviously nervous, white-lipped, furtive of eye, unhealthily pallid. And, aware of these things, a demon of daring entered into Binny Clay. She faced him, chin up, brows slightly raised, and frowning. Without preamble she took the war into the enemy's camp.

"See here, Gustav," she said, "there's got to be an end of this sort of thing — right away. From now on you and I separate — that is, as far as our mode of living is concerned! I'm through! Through — don't interrupt, *please* — with the kind of existence that has been ours up to now. I'm — going to work. I've *got* to work — if I'm going to get there in Van Bevan's show to *stay!* And, I give you my word, I'm *going* to stay!"

The man licked pale lips that were curiously dry. His eyes were fixed upon her in wonder, question, fear, and a leering suspicion. She met them unwaveringly, grimly determined, the words — those last pitiful words of Lola's diary — still burning in her brain.

"But I'm going to work on my own. The old order is going to change, with a vengeance! If you want to drink and play cards — you can do it somewhere else. This is *my* flat. I'm going to pay for it with *my* money — the money I shall earn jolly hard in the next few months! I've got my chance, and I'm going to grab it! The chance to shake off all old obligations, the chance to make good, the chance to earn a decent livelihood clean off my own bat! And look you here, Gustav De Mille, I'll stand not one instant's interference from you, now or hereafter! You go your way. I'm going mine. And don't you forget it, or, I can assure you, you'll be uncommonly sorry!"

"Good Gad!" De Mille spluttered, gasped, and came a somewhat unsteady step farther into the room. "What the devil are you talkin' about? Who do you think you are, anyway?" . . .

His tone was truculent. Binny, holding her ground, grinned in genuine enjoyment of the situation. It savoured spicily of the dramatic — even of the melodramatic; and melodrama had always been dear to Binny's heart. Many a night she had visualized herself as a perse-

cuted heroine surmounting insuperable barriers with an ease little short of miraculous; and now, since truth is stranger than fiction, she found herself fulfilling those amazing dreams. Nevertheless, though pleasurably and rather fearfully excited, her level brain was cool; those strangely beautiful eyes of hers were narrowed calculatingly, and amazingly unafraid.

"Who do you think you're talking to? My dear Gustav, if you take my advice, you'll go on the water-wagon for quite an appreciable period — you need to! Next thing you know you'll be seeing blue mice, and pink rats, and — er — dead bodies! Nice, comfy, cheerful things like that. Cut out the brandy and take a little more soda; do — or you'll find yourself in Queer Street. So!"

She watched his pallor deepen, thought of Lola, and hugged herself, diabolically triumphant at the momentary passing horror in his eyes.

"Who," she demanded, before he could speak, "do you *think* I am? . . . Oh, cut it out, and get a hold on yourself! I give you my word, you need to. I for one am getting a bit fed up with this — with everything, in

fact. I'm cutting it all out from now on. You can do what you jolly well like, but please don't come butting into my affairs — and don't try to get me mixed up in yours, 'cos I'll not stand for it. Get me?"

A sudden savage flare lit De Mille's red-rimmed eyes. "You're too deep in with me already to get out!" he told her, with a glance over his shoulder at the door, and speaking in a husky whisper. "You —"

"Oh, no — I'm not! Don't make any mistake like that, Gustav. I can get out, all right, any time I've a mind to. But when the necessity arises for me to 'get out' — more than I've done already — don't forget you 'get under.' And get under for keeps! I know too much about you, little man, for your health — *or* your liberty. Now, go home. And remember you come here by invitation in the future — or not at all!"

"You — " De Mille was upon her with a sudden quick movement, but in a flash she side-stepped.

Her own face was white, but she smiled — a cool, clear, rather cruel little smile. "You're not in a fit state for conversation!" she told him. "Go home. *Go home!* . . . And

don't come here again unless I ask you to. I tell you, I'm striking out fresh. *You* aren't going to stop me — because you can't! You may think you can, but you can't! First, because I've got the whip-hand. Second, because I'll use it, if you make me, without carin' a tuppenny-ha'penny cuss as to the consequences to myself! D'you get that?"

"By God! . . ."

"Don't blaspheme, Gustav!" Binny's voice was mocking, though her eyes were deadly cold. "Call upon the Devil, if you will — but go home and think of him, for the good of your soul! That's all I wanted to say to you — and it will be just as well for — er — your own peace of mind if you remember it!" She moved to the door, opened it, and stood aside. "Don't argue," she adjured him. "Sally's in the kitchen, and you're not in a state to be cautious. But remember I've as many good cards in my hand as you have, and don't forget that every time you see me, you're — er — likely to dream nasty dreams of — shall we say ghosts — and — maybe — the gallows? *Good*-night!"

She watched the dark blood die from his face, leaving him deadly white once more.

Watched him steadily, though in every limb she was trembling, and sickeningly cold.

In the kitchen Sally stirred.

De Mille, momentarily sobered, passed the girl slowly. "You" — he checked himself, and added under his breath — "By Heaven, Lola! You'll pay for this treatment. You'll pay!"

Binny smiled with a tranquillity she was far from feeling. "When I do," she assured him, "believe me, you'll pay too — to the uttermost farthing!" She laughed suddenly, rather harshly. "And don't forget, you've been drinking more than ever the last few days — you, and that fat little beast you're always bringing here!" The bow was drawn at a venture, but she saw by the expression of his eyes that it had struck its mark, and she followed up her advantage rather breathlessly. "Don't forget, Gustav, that while *dead men tell no tales* — drunken men *do!*"

Sally had come out of the kitchen. At Binny's gesture she opened the door, looking curiously from one to the other. Without a word, but with eyes that made Binny shudder as she met them, De Mille passed out.

As Sally shot the bolt home, Binny began

suddenly, hysterically, to laugh. Sally swung upon her, avidly questioning, eager for information.

"What's that?" she inquired, and Binny, checking her unseemly mirth, stared at her.

"That," she said weakly, and inadequately, at last — "that's — just *that!*"

XVIII

In the quickly passing weeks that ensued, Binny gave herself up, body, heart, and soul, to work. Deliberately, determinedly, she kept her mind fixed upon the possibilities of the future. She would not allow it to dwell upon that which had been. She soaked it in the atmosphere of Lola's subtle, exotic attraction, but her own vivid personality peeped through more often than not, especially when in the theatre.

On the stage Binny was in her element. On the stage, in the present position that was hers, she was intoxicated with delight. The acting instinct of her mother had descended all to her. She was an actress born, a fact which strongly mitigated her lack of training. At the first rehearsal, nervous, watchful, she was anything but at her best. Nevertheless, her indifferent performance was considerably more effective than any effort of Lola's had ever been.

Van Bevan smiled encouragingly at her, even while he sighed. It was beginning to

occur to him that he had taken a big risk in giving this girl the part of a favourite so popular as Lottie Carrall, who was not only a real artist, but a conscientious and earnest worker, remarkably devoid of arrogance or vanity. Binny's performance in Ivo Dallas's rooms had fired him with enthusiasm. Upon the cold boards of the unset stage, she was by no means so attractive.

Dallas, haggard, nervy, and unsatisfied, commented upon it. "Guess we were all drunk the other night!" he remarked sombrely.

Kyrle Harkness was with him. He shrugged, and smiled, not unkindly, but with a shade of impatience. It was a smile that suggested, perhaps unconsciously, that Van Bevan, for once, had made an error of judgment. Van Bevan saw it, flushed, and stiffened his thick shoulders. He was nettled, irritated. He liked Harkness well enough, but he objected to criticism.

"For the Lord's sake, give the girl a chance!" he growled. "Her worst attempt to-day has been better than her best so far! She seems scared."

"Scared!" Dallas lifted his brows. He

had known Lola Arnaut in varying moods, but he had never known her scared.

"That's what I said!" Van Bevan snapped the information. "I don't know why she should be, any more than you do, unless it is that she's beginning to realize that she's got to make good if she's going to get anywhere — or even stay put! Anyway, she's got something in her — a darn sight more, my boy, than either you or I suspected."

Harkness looked at him quizzically. "You're very hopeful, Mr. Van Bevan. I sincerely trust your judgment has been as excellent as always. I confess —" He paused.

Van Bevan positively snarled. "It has!" he retorted, with a confidence that he did not altogether feel. His eyes dwelt on Binny, poised now for a dance. Dallas was speaking to her curtly, with difficulty suppressing his disappointment. She was listening, her brilliant eyes directly fixed upon his. It was as if she sensed that she had not acquitted herself as well as had been expected. A little colour rose in her cheeks, but her gaze remained undaunted. If there was disturbance in her soul, she did not show it. She knew

her limitations as well as her possibilities. Moreover, she was forcing herself to remember she was playing as Lola Arnaut, not as Binny Clay. It made a difference. Later, when the surprise at the change in her had passed, she could let herself go, be herself. Just now there was still need of caution, lest she rouse suspicions she would be unable to subdue.

"It's all right, Mr. Dallas," she said quietly. "I'm feeling a bit strange, that's all — I'll have the hang of things better after I've gone through with the dances."

She was as good as her word. Van Bevan relaxed; Dallas breathed again. Kyrle Harkness raised his brows and regarded her with new interest. At the end of that day, exhausted, excited, and more than ever awed by the immensity of the task she had set herself, Binny knew satisfaction, a modest triumph.

Thereafter she forgot to be nervous; forgot very often that she was playing a part at all, and acted as she would have acted had this chance come to her direct, instead of through a dead woman. As her new surroundings became familiar to her, she knew a greater

ease, a greater self-assurance. In the theatre, and at home, she worked, indefatigably, exercising rigorously every supple, rippling muscle of her slim body, posing, pirouetting, seemingly unwearying.

By the time the opening performance was due, she was satisfied with her progress, if pardonably anxious. She was really interested, really happy, and thoroughly absorbed. From all sides she received encouragement. Van Bevan was cautious, if kindly, in his praise, Dallas unwilling. Dudley Farrance and Terry were frankly enthusiastic.

Irma Farrance had not seen her in the theatre. But after some slight hesitation she had called one day at Binny's flat. During her stay her brother had drifted in, and Terry. The latter Irma saw in a new guise — lounging at the piano, his long legs very much in the way, his big, brown hands drawing forth Ivo Dallas's charming melodies with the skill of increasing practice, smoking many cigarettes, and encouraging his hostess with praise that was genuine if flowery.

It came about that Irma was a visitor a second time, and a third, and then as often almost as her brother himself. She found

Binny quaint, unlike any woman of her own world, and really fascinating. The two girls liked each other with that undemonstrative, smooth, and controlled liking that one occasionally, if rarely, finds existing between two women. Each was interested in the other; more, each was interested in the other's love story. If Irma wondered occasionally, and with slight misgiving, how deep Binny's affection for Farrance might be, Binny had no doubt as to the strength of the tie that existed between Irma and Terry. Being of romantic temperament, she was wholly in sympathy with them both; rather more absorbed in their troubles, indeed, than in the situation created by Farrance's avowed affection for herself.

Concerning the latter she was unsure of her own feeling. He had the power to disturb her; often, feeling his eyes upon her, the rich colour would come and go in her cheeks; she would be conscious of a fluttering of her pulses, a stirring of her heart. Certainly she liked him, liked him as she had never liked any one in her life; not as she liked Terry, or Irma, or any of the new friends who were springing up around her, but differently, with greater depth.

That liking had grown since the day Farrance had shocked and startled her by declaring his love for her. It was increased by the fact that, while he showed, in every glance, every trivial attention, that he was entirely of the same mind still — while sometimes there was a passion of longing in his gaze that made her catch her breath and set her heart beating over-quickly, he had never once since voiced the desire in his soul. Rather wonderfully, she thought, he had continued her very good friend, troubling her with no whisper of love-making, respecting, tenderly, if somewhat wistfully, her plea that, at any rate for the present, until she was assured of real success, and a lasting place in her profession, they should remain just the friends they had always been.

She had gained a respite by begging that she might think, for the time, only of her work, might try sincerely to "make good." And, under the circumstances, Farrance had behaved in a manner which warmed her heart towards him, kept him more frequently in her thoughts than perhaps would otherwise have been the case.

For Binny was fired by an eagerness of

ambition, a grim and passionate determination to justify the praise her friends offered and the belief Van Bevan had shown in her, which was rapidly consuming her. Knowing much of the sordidness of the stage, the love of it was stronger in her blood than even she had guessed until now. Within a week nervousness had vanished, to return unexpectedly and overwhelmingly the night before the opening performance. During the day there had been so many calls upon her that she had had but little time for thought. Rather reluctantly she had consented to Farrance's earnest pleading to be allowed to take her, alone, to supper. She needed the meal, and enjoyed it, but her eyes were over-bright, her cheeks overflushed; she was restless, fidgety, and ill at ease.

She rose as soon as they had taken their coffee. "I'm dead tired!" she pleaded, meeting his look of disappointment, and with a quick murmur of understanding he put her cloak about her. He was driving her back to her flat in his own car, and as they stepped out into the night the chauffeur jumped down and opened the door for them, touching his cap, glancing at her woodenly.

It chanced that she met his eyes. And, unexpectedly, the action utterly uncontrolled, she caught up her hands to her face, covering her own. A little cry, hastily checked, broke from her lips — almost, for a moment, it was as if she recoiled.

When she had driven with Farrance in his own car of late, it had been in the daytime, and with himself at the wheel. Until now, in the stress of the passing days, she had almost forgotten that it had been Farrance's car in which Lola had been riding that fateful night — Farrance's own chauffeur who had ordered her off the footboard of this very car. To-night she recognized him instantly, and it was too much for her overwrought nerves. As Farrance, bewildered and concerned, put her into the car, she began to shiver. Then, as the servant, after a blank stare of respectful wonderment, climbed into his seat, she let her hands fall with a shuddering sob.

XIX

"Lola!" As the car slid forward, Farrance caught swiftly at the girl's trembling hands. His eyes were troubled, startled. "Lola — what is it?"

At his warm touch Binny's nerves grew steady again. Already she was recovering from her momentary shock of recollection. Thankfully she was realizing that Farrance could not possibly connect her strange behaviour with her encounter with the chauffeur. Also, thankfully, she was remembering that recognition could not possibly have been mutual. The man, like the rest of the world, knew her as Lola. Like the rest of the world, he accepted her as Lola. Furious with herself for her weakness, she looked at Farrance from beneath lashes that were wet.

"I'm so sorry!" She freed her hands and rubbed the back of one quickly across her eyes. "I — I don't even know what startled me. I've been all on the jump to-day. Everybody has, as a matter of fact, and my nerves

are frayed to shreds. I'm awfully silly!"

"You're awfully plucky!"

A little glow of warmth ran through her at the tone; she smiled, tremulously, gratefully. Again she was conscious of his steadying influence. She braced herself anew, and at the wavering sweetness of her eyes the man's throat contracted.

"Oh, Lola!" he whispered. "Lola! My dear . . ." He stopped short as she drew back, and into his eyes there crept a sudden look of pain.

The girl saw it, and made a sharp gesture. *"Please!"* she begged hastily, as though desirous of checking whatever he might be about to say, and Farrance sighed.

"I wonder," he said wistfully, "how much longer you're going to keep me at arm's length, Lola. I've been pretty patient, haven't I?"

"You've been an absolute dear!" Binny made the assurance generously, earnestly, and with something in her expression of which she was not aware, but which made the man bend quickly nearer to her. But she shook her head, drawing back. She said, with a slight shake in her voice: "It's your friendship I'm needing just now. The comfort of knowing you're

there, ready to help and to encourage — as you've always done. Friendship, and your faith in me. It's meant a lot to me, Dudley, being sure of those two things. It's going to mean more for these next few hours. Afterwards . . ." She broke off, catching her lip between her teeth.

Farrance's hand lay upon hers. At its touch her colour rose, the pulse began to beat in her throat. For a long moment the man looked steadily into her eyes. Then the car stopped and he took away his hand. He went with her as far as the door of her flat, and stood bareheaded while they waited for Sally to open the door.

"I shan't come in," he told Binny. "You're overwrought and worn out as it is — you need to rest. But" — he lowered his voice and lifted the hand she had given him for a moment against his breast — "I'm not going to forget 'afterwards,' Lola!"

Binny's lips parted in protest, and shut again as Sally opened the door. She did not answer, even when he released her fingers; but over her shoulder she gave him a smile, fearful, fleeting, provocative — and holding a subtle, wistful promise that set the blood

coursing hotly through his veins, and sent him on his homeward way a happier man than he had been for many days.

As for Binny, while Farrance's image lingered with her, comforting, friendly, she relaxed immediately she heard Sally's voice scolding kindly in her ears, and dropped into the chair the woman pushed forward for her.

"Dead beat, I'll bet!" the latter observed. "And no more sense than to go out to supper after a hard day's work, with a worse day ahead of you! Lord, you folks! . . . There, don't talk, and drink that soup. I don't care if you've had half a dozen dinners, you're goin' to eat that soup and take these aspirins, or I clear clean out here and now and let you get along as best you can to-morrow." Her tone was truculent; her hand as kindly as a mother's upon the girl's shoulder.

Binny laughed, shaking her tired head. She had come to understand Sally remarkably well in the last few weeks, and to like her. She ate the toast and drank the rich hot soup unwillingly, yet gratefully; then got to her feet.

"Dead beat's right, Sally!" she agreed. "I'm ready to drop!" She stretched whiter, plumper arms than she had hitherto known,

above her head, and Sally nodded apprais-ingly.

"You'll break down to-morrow night if you don't look out!" she prophesied with the cheerfulness of her class. "Not," she added encouragingly, "that I set much store on you making much of a hit. Show young ladies don't last long in decently big parts as a rule . . . and it's one thing to make a bit of a splash to a lot of folks who are friends and another to put it over a first-night audience. 'Specially when you're taking the place of a real favourite."

Binny grimaced. "You're a happy soul, Sally!" She let her arms drop and moved stiffly to the door. "Get me to bed. We'll see about to-morrow when to-morrow comes." Her face looked suddenly pinched, white, and haggard.

Sally, opening the door, coughed. "Not but what," she conceded, "you've been a darn sight better'n a good many I've seen in re-hearsals — and amazin' changed ever since Mr. Van Bevan gave you the contract. I'm sure I wish you all the luck, anyway."

Binny smiled at her; a small, faint, but indomitably optimistic smile. Half leaning

against the lintel of the door, she answered: "Thank you, Sally. I know you do. I'm beginning to realize myself that I've bitten off rather a big hunk. A whole lot more depends on me than I guessed would be the case. Only I've got to do my best, and, as you say, 'put it over,' if only for the sakes of Mr. Van Bevan and Mr. Dallas. It's going to mean a lot to them as well as to me!"

Sally, a hand on her elbow, eyed her shrewdly. "You bet," she asserted, "that it's goin' to mean *more!* You can mess up their show quite a bit, dearie, if you fall down on it. But you — well, if you're a failure you've got the nicest gentleman in London to turn to in Mr. Farrance, and no need to look at the footlights again!"

Sally propelled her across the hall and into the bedroom, where she undressed her deftly and with celerity. Binny submitted, a queer, twisted, wry little smile upon her lips. Something about it made Sally frown as she tucked the sheets in firmly.

"Mr. Farrance," she pronounced, "is worth a deal more than all the popularity *you'll* get, any day of the week. And don't you forget it!"

Between Binny's vision and the ceiling there rose anew the image of the man who had befriended her. Her throat contracted suddenly. She met Sally's eyes quietly. "I shan't!" she said soberly. "Oh — I shan't!"

But long after Sally had gone, she lay with clenched hands, staring into the firelit gloom, her face set, her eyes strained. Above all things at that moment she wanted to make good — wanted to justify the faith that three men had shown in her — wanted, achingly, eagerly, passionately, to know that she was something, somebody, worthy of the applause for which she yearned.

All her starved life she had prayed for a bare chance to gain some sort of footing. The fire of her mother's blood was in her veins; she wanted to be — if only for a little while — more than a nonentity, one of the great crowd of human beings who were mere lookers-on. She wanted to do, and to do well. And, strengthening that desire, she knew there was the greater desire to justify, absolutely and completely, Dudley Farrance's faith in her.

XX

WHATEVER nervousness Binny endured throughout the next seemingly interminable day was not noticeable in her manner. And when the time came for her to go upon the stage, it had slipped from her like a cloak. To those who watched her, her calm, her absolute serenity, was amazing, even irritating. She permitted Sally to dress her quite placidly; she smiled upon Dallas with a cheerfulness that made him want to shake her; she laughed at Van Bevan's pleadings that she should do her best.

"There's a pile of money in this thing," he assured her. "And most of the work, when we come to think of it, rests with you! The show'll be a dead frost if you're not equal to carrying it through — and I'll be the laugh of London! I, Van Bevan, who have never dished up a failure yet, or failed to pick a winner. I wish to the Lord I'd never been such a dog-goned fool as to give you the part! There, there, m'dear! No offence — only — only — " He stopped, at a loss for words.

Binny continued to smile, absently, serenely.

Her eyes were wide, over-bright, her lips tremulous with eagerness. Once, as she passed into the wings, a shudder shook her. Van Bevan saw, and groaned. Dallas saw, and thrust his fingers wildly through his hair. But it was a shudder of excitement, not of nervousness.

Her chance had come: the chance of a lifetime. The chance to be famous, the chance to fight and coax and force her way into the curious heart of the great public. She must do it to-night, or not at all.

With the glare of the footlights in her eyes, she drew a long breath. She was aware of the fact that, somewhere, Farrance was watching her, eagerly, Van Bevan agonizedly. But she saw neither of them. She saw nothing but a haze of light — a sea of faces. She knew nothing but that she was in the limelight — full in the limelight — and that the success of the great Van Bevan's biggest production depended upon her. She heard nothing but the seductive, lilting sweetness of the opening bars of the first song that Dallas had written for her. And, after one tense, tremulous moment of hesitation, she began to sing.

Singing, she was swept off her feet, away from realities. With the ending of the song and the beginning of her dance, she was transfigured. She had forgotten the audience, everything. She swayed to the music, breathing it, every lilting movement of her supple body expressing the meaning that Dallas had put into the composition.

The curtain shut her away to a storm of applause. In the wings Van Bevan seized upon her, perspiring profusely.

"Great!" he gurgled. "Great! If you can keep it up! If only you can keep it up!"

Binny passed him smiling. She was in a dream, a wonderful, bewildering dream. It was not until the fall of the last curtain that she awoke. Van Bevan was pumping her hands up and down, looking so apoplectic that she thought he would collapse then and there.

"B'gosh! But you've made the show! Listen to 'em! Listen! Lord, girl, don't stand here gaping at me! Go on! Take your call! *Now* who says Van Bevan don't know a winner when he sees one? Go on, I tell you!"

When at last the uproar had subsided, Binny found Farrance at her side, the touch

of his hands on hers. With the passionate admiration and commendation of his eyes the first knowledge of success was borne in upon her. The auditorium was silent, the theatre rapidly emptying. Only the hum of voices immediately about her was real.

She gasped, and caught suddenly at Farrance's arm. From somewhere behind him, at a lumbering run, Terry appeared. His freckled face was aglow, his eyes ashine.

"Oh, you!" he hailed her. "Oh, you kid! Sure, and wasn't it meself that said you'd be famous this night? I did so! And so you are, begorrah! And so you are!"

Binny, blinking anew, laughed rather tremulously. An instant later she stiffened. In the background, watching her closely, sardonic, unsmiling, was Gustav De Mille. And for an instant she was conscious of a sensation of having plunged into cold water.

He met her eyes, and bowed. "A wonderful success, Lola!" he remarked, without coming towards her. "Let us hope — that it will last!"

Binny's eyes narrowed, her face paled. Then her head went up. Deliberately, softly, mockingly, she laughed in his face.

XXI

Success! Binny went to bed that night with the word ringing in her ears, drunk with the knowledge that it was hers, drowned in the wonder of it, amazed, and breathlessly thankful. She had made good. She had "put it over." She had kept her promise to Van Bevan. She had, by token of his assurance, apart from that of the thunderous applause of a somewhat critical house, made the show. She had got, in one soaring flight, where she had yearned to be for long, drab, weary years. She had borne Lola Arnaut's name, but deep within her she knew that her audience had paid homage, as one man, to the vivid personality of herself, to her own talent, not to the stellar importance of her name. Applause, to-night, and personal congratulations had been for her — for her, Binny Clay — and for her alone. She knew it, and exulted in it.

In childhood, with chilled toes peeping through pitifully patched shoes, dancing to the monotonous melody of barrel-organs, she had dreamed of this hour; in young, half-

starved girlhood, facing the footlights in gaudy, tawdry finery, a "fairy" in some fourth-rate pantomime, she had hugged that dream for warmth to her meagre breast. With budding womanhood it had gone with her, keeping hope alive, making existence possible. It had, all-compelling, driven her to her outrageous course of action. It had steadied her in her determination to win to her goal, to keep firm her grasp upon the skirts of an opportunity which had been wafted to her reach in a manner little short of miraculous.

Her triumph was fully justified in the weeks that followed. Successful night followed successful night. Dallas, paler than ever, but with a growing content beneath the restless flame of his eyes, wrote new songs, new dance music. Van Bevan rubbed his hands, smiled more than ever benignly, and nightly surveyed the crowded house with increasing satisfaction. Sally clucked like an excited hen, and declared daily, with a brazen lack of truth, that she "had known Miss Lola had it in her all the time." An inaccuracy which Binny let pass without comment.

Terry was violently but genuinely jubilant. Nevertheless, as the days slipped by, Binny

began to notice a marked change in him. He looked harassed; his usually irrepressible gaiety of spirits and manner gradually left him. He grew taciturn, seemed to fall into a brooding, unhappy mood even when in the jolliest company. Binny noticed, but made no comment. Nevertheless, she was disturbed and regretful. She liked Terry, and she liked Irma, very much. By now she was, thanks to that strange, subtle quality of sympathetic understanding which was hers, considerably in the confidence of both. She watched them, noting that Irma was increasingly unhappy, ungirlishly sober; that while there was a passionate intensity in their handclasp when they met in her presence, they seldom said very much to each other.

It troubled her. She attacked Terry upon the subject, characteristically and unexpectedly, one day after the three had spent the afternoon together, and Irma had departed somewhat hastily to dress for a dinner preceding a theatre engagement. Terry had put her into her car, but had not suggested accompanying her. He mooned back into Binny's presence, and she regarded him for a moment or two in silence.

"Anything in particular wrong with you lately, Terry?" she demanded. "You've been like a bear with a sore head for weeks now — almost ever since the show opened. Not a bit like yourself . . . And as for Irma! . . . ." She threw up her hands. "She's a bundle of nerves, and looks as if she hadn't had a decent square meal for days. You haven't quarrelled?"

Shrewd yet kindly eyes searched his, and beneath them he halted in his restless pacing, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

"Quarrelled!" The word was an explosion. He stood glowering at her resentfully, and she made a little grimace.

"Sorry! But you're so — queer — both of you. And I don't like to see it!" She hesitated, regarding him from under gold-tipped lashes; then: "I don't want to seem to interfere — to butt into your affairs and — and Irma's — unwarrantably. Only — you've both been so decent to me — such pals. And I hate to see either of you miserable." Her voice lifted wistfully.

The note of it lured Terry to instant contrition, impulsive appreciation of her sympathy. He reached for her hand. "Sure, and

you're the dearest kid!" His big fingers gripped hers hard. "The real, right sort of pal for any chap to have! It's meself and Irma are agreed there. Irma likes you as much as I do, Lola; and I'm glad of it. She hasn't many folks about her she's fond of, or whom she can call friends!" He spoke bitterly.

Binny looked at him, and nodded. The answering pressure of her fingers was warmly sympathetic, and his face softened.

"As for *interfering!* . . . Oh, Lord! Lola! Surely you know better than that?"

Binny laughed, swift sweetness in her eyes. "Then — what's all the trouble?"

Terry loosed her hand and walked away to the window.

After a moment she got up and followed him. "Benjamin Clay again?"

He wheeled at that, his mouth grim. He answered directly, almost savagely. "Yes! Benjamin Clay again! *Damn* him!" There was an expression in his eyes that half frightened her. He turned a thumb down upon the polished table between them. "He's got me there, Lola! I'm powerless. I told you before I couldn't meet my debts. It's

worse now. He's squeezing me harder than ever, bringing more and more pressure to bear. I . . . I guess things are pretty desperate!"

Binny's eyes hardened, narrowed, grew alert, questioning. "Desperate?" Her tone was sharp.

Terry's white face was queerly set as he replied: "Quite desperate. I tell you, I'm done. Clay can break me — ruin me. I don't stand a dog's chance!"

Binny's face was altogether sober now; and she ran swift fingers through her hair, frowning up at him in troubled perplexity.

"I don't think," she told him, "that I quite understand, even now. You owe this man Clay money, a lot of money — and you can't pay him? That right?"

Terry nodded grimly. "That's right. He's lent me money, from time to time, at interest. The interest is a fortune in itself. Like the rest of his kind, he's a thieving rogue . . . but one doesn't realize that until one's in up to the neck. I can't find the money that I owe him — and I can't find the interest! I'm — in the parlance of the day — dead broke."

"But what's going to happen?"

He flung out his hands. "Ruin. Just that, plain and simple. I didn't stand much of a chance with Irma, anyhow, before. Perhaps you've learned a little of the situation as far as she's concerned — or deduced it. Her people always were dead against me. Not that I can exactly blame them for that. Only . . . Oh, it's damnable! I've been a fool, and worse. But, begorrah, I'm going to pay for it, I'm thinking! I'm in a hole that no one can pull me out of!" His voice ceased suddenly.

Binny shivered. Here was tragedy, stark, unexpected, sensed by herself rather than expressed in Terry's words. Terry was "up against it." He had used the word "ruin," and had, she knew, not exaggerated. She put her hand out and touched his arm. Her eyes were wide with distress.

"Oh!" she whispered. "*Oh!* But I'm sorry, *sorry*. Isn't there anything . . . can't *anybody* do anything?"

Terry shook his head. He did not speak.

Presently she let her hand fall, and said: "But — Irma? Does she know?"

The look that came into the boy's face

then hurt her physically. She felt suddenly that she wanted to cry.

"She'll know to-night," he said slowly, draggingly. "She'll have to know to-night. We can't go on like this. And in a little while — Lord knows how soon! — I may be, *shall* be, down and out — or worse!"

"Don't!" Binny flashed upon him, then flung out her hand again. "Look here, I've got some money. Quite a bit. Van Bevan's increased my screw — he's been a real old sport like that — and I've more than I want. Lots more. Won't you borrow it? Even if it's not enough, it may keep that wretched Clay man quiet — give you a chance to think of what to do. Oh, Terry! If we're really pals — you and I and Irma — *do!*"

Terry looked at her. Into those strange, warm, melting Irish eyes of his there came an expression that brought a lump to her throat. He took her hands, but even as he did so, he shook his head.

"No!" He added, at her hurt exclamation: "I would, like a shot — and love you for it, kid! Only you don't understand. It's too late to offer Clay any kind of sop. He's got the pull on me every way. I'm done!"

XXII

Terry said the same, in substance, to Irma Farrance that same night; said it briefly, and in his despair, brutally, softening the stark truth not at all. But at that which lay in his eyes the bitter cry of pain and protest that rose to her lips died unuttered. She just stood staring at him, wide-eyed, motionless, her fingers gripped tightly about the stem of the great geranium-red feather she held, her small face quite expressionless.

The play to which she had been was over; she had come, with her mother and Kyrle Harkness, to the house of a mutual friend where there was to be an informal dance. Terry had known where to find her, and now, momentarily alone, they stood facing each other in a silence which to both seemed suffocating. Quite near to them was the sound of laughter, of music; but neither of them heard.

It was Irma who broke the silence at last. "Terry! When you speak of ruin — when you say that everything must be at an end

— what do you mean? Oh, *what* do you mean?"

There was a rising note of terror in her voice; instinctively she threw out a hand to him, but Terry did not touch her.

"Just that." His voice rang harsh, hopeless, and the girl shivered. "I'm ruined; and it's the end. The end between us; the end of everything, as far as I'm concerned!"

"The end between us . . . *Terry!* It mustn't be! It shan't be!" Her hands were upon his arm now, clinging, trembling hands that gripped with a steely strength of which he had never suspected them. Her eyes implored, her lips were unsteady.

He looked away from her, the suffering in his face deepening. "It must be! What else? God knows, I've been a fool ever to hope that there might be anything lasting in our friendship — in our love. I had little enough to offer, in the beginning. I've less now! I'm not only penniless; I'm up to my eyes in debt. For all I know — and, by the saints, I'm as poor a business man as my father before me! — it may mean prison. It must mean disgrace. Certainly it means ruin. Ruin, absolute and complete!" He took her hands

gently but determinedly away from his arm. "Now" — he demanded, bleakly, wretchedly — "do you understand?"

The bright feather slid from Irma's fingers and lay, unheeded, at her feet. She looked piteously small and fragile — so small, so fragile that Terry made a swift movement towards her. He checked it an instant later as a laughing couple of dancers hesitated at the entrance of the little room. Then, as if he found the sight of her, the appeal of the great dark eyes, of the wan, scared face, too much for him, he swung abruptly on his heel, and, brushing swiftly past the two chatterers at the entrance, went across the hall, and, presently, through the big doors into the night.

The dancers changed their minds and passed on. A fresh gust of laughter came from some distant room. The sound of the music was very distinct now. But Irma did not move. Her hands hanging limply at her sides, the bright feather glowing at her feet, she stood looking straight before her. She did not hear the sound of a step. She did not know that she was no longer alone until some one touched her lightly on the arm.

Then, with a shuddering little gasp, she turned, to meet Kyrle Harkness's eyes. They were grave, kindly, even troubled, and for a moment she looked into them rather dazedly.

As she made a swift, nervous gesture, he stooped, retrieving the feather, and laid it gently back in her hands.

"Miss Farrance," he said quietly, "I am sorry, but I have been eavesdropping." He saw the startled light that leaped to her eyes, and made a slight gesture. "I had no intention of doing so, needless to say. I was out there, on the balcony, beyond those plants. Young O'Farrer had already said a good deal before I quite realized how private a conversation it was between you. Again — I am sorry."

Irma opened her lips, and closed them again. She did not know what to say. There was something about the directness of the man that she could not help admiring; but she was frightened. He saw it, and lifted his hand.

"Needless to say," he assured her quietly, "I shall forget what I heard. Nevertheless —" He paused.

Irma, with an inarticulate murmur, had made a movement towards the entrance. In a stride he reached it before her; drew to, swiftly, the door concealed behind the velvet curtains. As she halted, he faced her, brows bent, his eyes dwelling still gravely upon her.

"I want to speak to you," he said gently. "There is something I have to say to you which will, at any rate, interest you, if nothing more."

Again she opened her lips; again closed them.

Harkness went on. "First, as I have already told you, I overheard practically the whole of young O'Farrer's conversation with you. It is as plain to me as it is to you that he is in very serious difficulties, that, to use his own words, he is up against ruin. It is plain to me, too, that you are very deeply distressed — that you would do a very great deal to help him; to get him out of his difficulties, to free him from — er — shall we say the clutches? — of this money-lender, Benjamin Clay. That is right, isn't it?"

The colour was back in Irma's cheek now; there was a growing, resentful sparkle in her eyes.

Harkness lifted his hand. "I don't want you to get angry. And I don't want you to think that I am speaking out of mere impertinent curiosity. It is in my power to help Terry O'Farrer, quite considerably."

He heard her caught breath, saw the bright rose die out of her face, leaving her white, watched her eyes widen and grow eager. He went on:

"I know Benjamin Clay — fairly well. I have influence with him. Considerable influence. I am quite confident that, if I say the word, he will waive all claim to that extortionate interest upon his loans to O'Farrer of which the latter complains; will be perfectly agreeable to await repayment of those loans at O'Farrer's convenience, and that he will at no future time take unwarrantable advantage of his power over O'Farrer."

There was a short silence. Irma was looking at him blankly, as though powerless to comprehend his meaning.

He waited a moment; then: "You do understand, don't you?" Harkness asked. "If I — have a little talk with Ben Clay, it will put matters completely straight for our young friend. He will hear from Mr. Clay to that effect as early as to-morrow morning."

"But — but" — Irma spoke with a faint stammer — "Terry wouldn't — wouldn't be willing — I mean — you and he — it is not as though you were — were friends . . ." She broke off.

Harkness smiled; it was not an unpleasant smile, yet beneath it the girl's eyes grew apprehensive. Harkness said quietly: "Rather — rivals." And quite involuntarily Irma lifted her hand up against her throat. Once more the colour surged to her temples, once more died. She remained silent, watching him, still with the apprehension in her eyes. He went on: "There is no reason whatever why Mr. O'Farrer should know anything of my part in the change of Clay's attitude. No reason that he should suspect it. The matter should rest between just — ourselves."

If there was significance in the last word it was so slight, so subtle, that very few would have noticed. Irma, because of her consciousness of Harkness's feeling for her, was painfully aware of it. Impulsively she voiced the fear and suspicion that were growing in her mind.

"Mr. Harkness, you would not be willing to do so much — to go to such lengths for

a man who is no more than an acquaintance unless — unless you expected something in return!" The words were at once an assertion and a question.

The line of Harkness's lips grew grim. "No man reaches the position I am in by giving anything for nothing. Naturally, I should expect something in return. I think you know what it is."

Irma's hands clenched over the feather, crushing it ruthlessly. Her eyes were dilated. For a long, tense moment they clung to his, searching. Then she let her hands fall apart in a movement that was oddly despairing.

"Yes," she said, "I know."

Harkness bent his head. "That being so," he said, "I shall be glad if you will give me your decision at once. You may find it difficult to believe, but I find the rôle of 'villain' " — he smiled bitterly — "a distinctly unpleasant one. I had hoped to persuade you to do me the inestimable honour of becoming my wife without bringing pressure to bear. Since that proved impossible . . ." He paused; then added: "I should like to speak to your father to-night. Should like to know matters settled as far as your family is concerned, even if our

engagement is not immediately announced publicly."

Irma's face had grown deadly pale. The very quiet and gentleness of his manner left her with a sickening sense of helplessness. At the back of her brain Terry's despairing words were ringing; before her eyes his face, hopeless, haggard, suffering, seemed to rise. A passionate yearning to succour him sprang to life within her, yet with it was a shuddering shrinking from the sacrifice that she must make. As from a great distance she heard Harkness's voice: "Are you willing?" he was asking, and for a stifling moment she was silent, fighting against the revolt within her soul, the desire to fling refusal in his face. Then, drearily, very low, she answered him. "Not willing!" she said, and in her voice was sudden scorn. "But I consent."

. . . . . .

That night, restless for some reason, unable to sleep, Binny sat cuddled among her pillows, the shaded light glowing warmly upon her, the white cat purring peacefully at the foot of the bed. Upon the thick eiderdown were scattered a few papers; those few papers which Mrs. Jenkins, of Fulgarth Street, had

guarded among her own poor possessions: her birth certificate; her mother's marriage certificate. What prompted her to bring them forth to-night she did not know. She even touched them half reluctantly, yet with a certain wistful interest. They reminded her poignantly of cruelly hard days, of blows, and hunger, and disappointment.

She laid them before her, just the two certificates, and a soiled slip of paper bearing pencilled instructions for the feeding of an infant. A lump rose in Binny's throat; a little bitterness in her heart. Then, her eyes upon the certificates, side by side, she sat upright, staring. One certified the marriage of Mary Munro and Benjamin Clay; the other, the registration of the infant daughter of Mary and Benjamin Clay.

Of Mary — and *Benjamin Clay!*

XXIII

"Benjamin Clay!" Binny, turning the papers about in her fingers, whispered the name softly to herself, a frown of the deepest perplexity creasing her smooth brows. She was suddenly alert, her mind working rapidly, her gaze intent. Her pulses had begun to flutter with a faint excitement.

Benjamin Clay! Benjamin Clay, the money-lender — and Benjamin Clay, the father she had never known! Was it possible — *could* it be possible — that there was any connection between the two? She lay very still, staring straight in front of her, her eyes wide, and bright, and more than ever intent. The possibility that her father and Benjamin Clay, the money-lender, were one and the same was surely making the stretch of the arm of coincidence a little too long. And yet . . . She drew a slow breath, folding the papers very carefully, tucking them away beneath her pillows. The name Benjamin Clay was not quite an ordinary one. The money-lender was a somewhat mysterious person. According to the late Mrs. Jenkins,

her father had been a somewhat mysterious person, too. She lay wide awake for a long time, wondering, pondering, intrigued; but finally fell asleep unsatisfied and as perplexed as ever.

Her days were busy now, strenuous days of hard work that she very thoroughly enjoyed, and into which she put her heart and soul. Upon the morrow she found little time to think about the coincidence of her father's name being the same as that of Terry O'Farrer's "shark." When she did remember it, she was conscious only of a half-irritated bewilderment. Binny was one of those persons who, when working, is absorbed completely in her work. And Van Bevan and Dallas between them kept her going.

It was not until tea-time that she found herself with any leisure at all. And even as Sally brought in a well-laden tray to the sitting-room the doorbell rang. Binny reached for a powder-puff and sighed.

"If possible, I'm out!" she whispered, and the woman, nodding understandingly, disappeared. But she came back, followed by Dudley Farrance, and departed in search of a second tea-cup.

Farrance, his eyes instantly alight at the sight of Binny, came to her quickly, taking her hand in a warm clasp.

"You're alone?" he demanded, with a quick glance round the room, and dropped into a chair near her with a sigh of relief. "Thank the Lord for that! Do you know, Lola, I don't believe I've had one whole minute alone with you since the first night of this blessed show! I've been feeling desperate!"

Binny looked at him, laughed; and then, for no reason, blushed. She sat upright as Sally came back with the cup.

"It *has* been a sort of a scrum, hasn't it?" she agreed. "All the same, you're exaggerating." She poured him some tea and handed it to him.

Farrance eyed her reproachfully. "Not much," he protested. "I really have been feeling horribly out in the cold."

There was the least shadow of hurt in his eyes, and Binny flushed guiltily. Impulsively she stretched a hand across the table to him.

"I'm sorry! I did not mean to be unkind, to seem ungrateful! I —"

"My dear," Farrance's fingers closed firmly round the slender ones, and he leaned quickly

nearer to her, "it is not gratitude I want — or just kindness. I want your heart — yourself. And . . . Oh, Lola! It seems to me I've been waiting overlong!" There was yearning in his voice, but something of sternness in his eyes.

Binny, meeting them, paled, striving unsuccessfully to free her hand. She was conscious of a tremendous change in Farrance. His easy-going boyishness had deserted him. He was very much a man, deadly in earnest, a man who had suddenly come to the end of his endurance.

It was unexpected, startling. The girl realized with the sudden quickening of her pulses that a time had come to put an end to dallying. She must face the fact of Farrance's love for her seriously. She must look deep into her own heart — very deep — and see, for certain, how much was there that she could give to him in return. She could hold him off no longer. She knew that, knew it by the burning hunger of his eyes, the grip of his nervous fingers. And while she was in a panic at the knowledge, she admitted deep down in the heart of which she was so unsure that she could not expect otherwise.

Farrance had been infinitely patient, a lover in no wise exacting. He had been ready to give of his help and his understanding, his love and his homage, and to wait, uncomplaining, for his reward. From the first he had shown her an amazing sympathy. He had always put her, and her welfare, before his own desires.

She freed her hand at last and sat back, leaving her tea untouched. Her eyes looked dark, and were faintly troubled. She was face to face with issues which she had hoped to avoid for some little time yet. She had never allowed herself to dwell upon her feeling for Dudley Farrance. She knew that she liked him; more than liked him. She knew that he was the first person to whom she would turn should need arise. She knew that she might rely upon him in any emergency, that there was pleasure in being with him, in knowing that he cared for her. Now she found herself a trifle breathless. She wondered at the warmth of colour in her cheeks, at the hammering of her heart, the beating of her pulses. She wondered why it was so difficult to look into Farrance's eyes.

"I'm sorry!" she said again, rather stupidly,

she felt; and the next moment found herself swept, bodily, into his arms. She struggled for an instant, then was still, her eyes closing as his mouth found hers. She never forgot that kiss; nor did Farrance. It broke down barriers, made certain that which hitherto had been unsure. It brought revelation to them both, set them trembling, awed and amazed them, and kept them dumb by the very wonder of its teaching.

Farrance was stammering when he spoke at last. "You love me? Lola, you do love me?"

That was all. But Binny, lifting a face all wet with tears, and two drenched eyes that had the light of morning itself aglow in their depths, reached her hands up about his neck, clinging close.

"Oh, yes, yes!" she breathed. And added, very simply, very sincerely, with a note of such wonderful new tenderness in her voice that Farrance hid his eyes for a moment against the white, pulsing throat: "I love you!"

XXIV

Ensued an interval of that mysterious, expressive silence such as only lovers, very new to the magic of love, can achieve. It was broken by the ostentatious entrance of Sally, who cast a scandalized glance at the untouched tea. Her acid comment, however, died upon her lips as she caught sight of the culprits. For a moment she gaped. Then, smiling wisely and with great satisfaction, she bore away the tray.

Drawing the door to with her foot she announced over her shoulder: "I'll bring some in fresh — in ten minutes. By that time, maybe, you'll be able to give your attention to it; *and* the cakes, over which I've been broiling my face and breaking my back half of the afternoon!"

Binny giggled helplessly. Farrance smoothed his hair hurriedly in front of the mirror. The white cat stirred, stretched a languid paw and yawned, eyeing them both with withering contempt. From the window boxes there came a warm rush of hyacinth-

scented air. Farrance turned abruptly and caught the girl by the shoulders.

"Lola!" he whispered, thickly, eagerly. "Oh, Lola! When are you going to marry me?"

Binny gasped, and stiffened suddenly. Once more cold fingers of dismay were groping at her heart. Her eyes widened, grew distressed.

"Oh!" she whispered blankly. "Oh! But — but I hadn't thought about being *married!*"

Farrance stared. The light died out of his eyes. Then, unexpectedly, he threw back his head and laughed.

Binny flushed, and wriggled quickly free. "I mean . . . need we think about that just yet?" Her eyes were appealing; she stood with her hands clasped before her, very earnest, sobered, troubled.

A shadow crossed Farrance's face, and he sighed. "I thought," he reproached her, "that you said you loved me."

"I do!" The flush deepened to a rose so glorious that he had difficulty in preventing himself from catching her in his arms again. "It is not that! Only — only — marriage . . ." She broke off, spreading her hands wide. She turned away quickly, and went to

the window, leaning far out over the hyacinths. He followed, and she went on quickly: "I don't suppose you understand. Only, I've been so free. I've never thought — very seriously — about being married. And then, there's my work. You'd want me to give that up if — if I married you. And I couldn't. At least, not yet. There's my contract with Mr. Van Bevan." She looked back at him over her shoulder.

Farrance's face was moody, yet again, in spite of himself, he smiled. "What a kid you are!" he exclaimed. "What a lovely, lovely kid! And — only a few short months ago, Lola — I believed you to be an absolute woman of the world! Lord, how you've changed!"

Binny frowned, bit her lip, and drew herself back into the room again. "For better or worse?" she demanded, with that irrepressible coquetry of even the least flirtatious woman who knows she has a man absolutely enslaved.

"Infinitely for the better!" Farrance assured her fervently. "Oh, Lola! I didn't begin to really *love* you until that night when you surprised us all with your dancing at

Dallas's flat. I liked you; you attracted me. I delighted in your beauty. But it wasn't the same. Not the same as now."

"Do you mean that? Really mean it, from your very soul?" Binny's hand flashed out and closed upon his sleeve. Her eyes, oddly intent, searched his. She seemed to wait with a curious tenseness, eagerness, anxiety, for his answer.

He gave it after a minute, quietly, with a sincerity she could not question: "I mean it, Lola. I don't know what happened, that night. I don't know what spell you used to change me, and yourself. It was as if all my heart went out to you in a sudden rush of tenderness which I had never felt for you before. I knew that night, definitely, and for the first time, that I loved you. That I should always love you. That my love for you, like my need of you, would grow greater with every passing day. Oh, yes, my dear. I mean it!"

He drew a long breath, adding, before she could speak: "I don't quite know how to express it, Lola, but you seemed to lure the very heart out of my body that night. I've ached ever since with the longing to hold you

in my arms, knowing you absolutely mine!"

Binny, to hide a fresh fluttering of her pulses, a deeper confusion, took refuge in soft mockery. "One would think you'd been taking lessons in love-making from Terry O'Farrer!" she asserted wickedly. "Not" — in some haste — "that I've ever heard him make love, but I can imagine how he'd do it! By the way — "

"*Lola!*" Farrance caught her by the shoulders again, shaking her gently. "Be serious!" he pleaded. "Oh, my dear, I'm in deadly earnest. You don't know, you *can't* know, how greatly I care, or you wouldn't make fun of me!"

"I'm not making fun!" Binny sobered instantly, touched, remorseful. "There's nothing to make fun of." Her eyes, troubled still, but sweetly intent, met his. "I'm glad, and proud, and happy that you should love me. I'm glad that I love you. Only — for a little while — I don't want to think about being married."

She lifted her hands and laid them gently upon his breast. "I'm a worker," she told him, speaking rapidly, earnestly. "I've got my profession, a profession I love. And when

I marry you, you'll want me to give it up. That's natural enough; and I should expect it. But I don't want to give it up quite yet. I want to go on just a bit longer. I want to taste a little more of the delight of doing well, the pride of achieving a certain amount of fame. And I want to give Mr. Van Bevan a full run for his money. I wonder if you understand?" Voice and eyes were wistful.

Farrance laid his hands over those clasped against his breast. A new tenderness was in his eyes, a shadow of reflected wistfulness. "I do. And I'll be content — or try to be — if you'll let me announce our engagement; if you will promise to marry me some time, not too far distant."

Under his Binny's fingers stirred. Her eyes were veiled. She did not answer immediately, and the line of her grave lips was troubled. She was assailed by new qualms of doubt and uncertainty. For the moment, thrilling to the love in his voice, she had forgotten that she was not really Lola Arnaut; that she was an impostor. She was a cheat; she was wearing another woman's name, living another woman's life. She was suddenly afraid. And then her mouth grew stern. She might be

wearing Lola Arnaut's identity, might be an impostor; but she was earning her own living, and by her own skill and talent and hard work. And it was herself, not Lola Arnaut, that this man loved. She knew that, was sure of it. Slowly, half unwillingly, she lifted her head and looked at him.

He bent quickly to her, his eyes eager. "Will you?" he begged. "Lola — will you?"

An instant longer Binny hesitated. Then she nodded. And as his arms went round her, Sally appeared once more upon the threshold with fresh tea. Binny made a startled movement to free herself, but Farrance held her fast.

Sally, grinning from ear to ear, set the tray down, and stood regarding them benevolently, arms akimbo.

"At last!" she remarked, with the occasionally staggering and unconscious familiarity of the privileged person of her class. "Sure, I've guessed all the way along that there was love-making in the air, and I reckoned things were gettin' a move on when you both forgot your tea — *and* the tea-cakes." She rubbed one hand upon an ample hip and presented it first to Binny, then to Farrance.

"You're lucky!" she assured him. "I've never lived with a young lady I've liked better than Miss Lola, never. Not but what she's lucky, too, sir. And now, do be havin' your tea. You can't live on love, you know — and it's fresh made and the cakes nice and hot."

Binny gurgled; Farrance laughed outright.

At the door Sally paused. "Which reminds me," she said inconsequently, "Miss Farrance has just rung up, askin' if you'd be in. I took the liberty of tellin' her you were engaged for twenty minutes or so, but that after that she'd be sure to find you here all right. I'll bring her right in!"

Binny, very pink, and adorably ruffled, subsided hastily into a chair before the tea-tray. Farrance went and stood beside her, "eatin' her with his eyes," as Sally romantically expressed it as she closed the door.

"Which reminds *me*," he said, taking his cup, "that Irma became engaged to Kyrle Harkness last night. I don't think I've ever been so surprised."

"*What?*" Binny put the tea-cup down with a clatter and sat upright. There was shocked amaze and disbelief in her whole expression.

Farrance made a gesture. "It's quite true.

I admit I don't understand it. She — she's had the deuce of a time with our parents, but she stood out against them with a determination I thought nothing could shake. And it's been pretty plain to me — to you, as well, I do not doubt — that Terry and she —"

"She's in love with Terry! She's as much in love with him as he is with her! She will *always* be in love with him! She must be crazy, quite crazy!" She stopped, breathless.

Once more, it seemed, Sally's cakes were destined to be left untouched. With Binny's outburst came the distant ringing of the doorbell. Binny reached her feet as Sally, with a flourish, announced Irma Farrance.

Before the door had well closed again, she was at the other girl's side, her face full of question and concern. "Irma! It's not true, surely, *surely,* that you're engaged to Mr. Harkness? Dudley has just told me, but I don't believe it. I can't!"

Irma put her hand up to her breast as though to loosen her fur, and let it fall again. She came forward wearily and dropped into the chair by the tray.

"It's quite true." She spoke heavily, dully,

and Binny caught an audible breath. For a moment she thought of Terry, and rage shook her.

"Oh! But how could you? How *could* you! When it's Terry you love — Terry you'll go on loving till you die!"

Irma winced as though she had been struck.

Binny went on, a whirlwind of emotion. "I didn't think you were that sort of girl. I didn't think, just because Terry's poor, you'd treat him so! I didn't think — Oh!" She stopped suddenly, smitten by the sight of Irma's suffering face. In a moment she was at her side again, kneeling by her. "*Why?*" she demanded. "Why did you do it? Why did you give in? Why — why — why?"

Irma lifted her hands and let them fall back helplessly into her lap. Her eyes met Binny's drearily, without resentment. "There was nothing else to do," she said at last, slowly, and Binny, catching her by the shoulders, shook her forcefully.

"*Why?*" she cried again. Her tone was passionately insistent.

Farrance, his eyes upon his sister's white face, came a step forward, but Binny pushed aside his outstretched hand. And, presently,

as if half against her will, yet with a certain relief, Irma answered.

"For Terry's own sake. He's in trouble. Bad trouble. With — with some money-lender. Kyrle Harkness knows him — the money-lender. He can use his influence to prevent him pressing Terry unduly; can help Terry—save him!" Again she put up her hand to her furs. "Only," she added, earnestly, "Terry must not know! He must not!"

There was a sudden silence. It endured for several moments. Then, abruptly, Binny whirled to her feet. Her lips were apart, her eyes had begun to shine. Then in a flash she was gone. They heard her calling to Sally for hat and coat, then her voice at the telephone, giving a number imperatively.

"That Mr. Clay's office — Mr. Benjamin Clay? Yes. Is Mr. Clay there? Will you tell him a lady is coming along to see him at once. A lady — the name doesn't matter now. Only she must see Mr. Clay *himself*. She must . . . I can't help Mr. Clay's orders. Tell him that the lady — knew Mary Munro! Thanks. That's all. I'll hold the line till you find out if he'll see me. . . . Hello! Hello! Yes — Mr. Clay will see me? Will

wait? Thank you. Tell him I'm coming at once. *Good*-bye!" She put down the receiver and stood up stiffly. The blaze of excitement was still in her eyes.

As she slipped into the coat the amazed Sally held for her, she murmured, cryptically, and with something of awe: "They *must* — he must — be the same Benjamin Clay . . . since 'Mary Munro' did the the trick!"

XXV

"LAND's sake!" Sally was expostulating, bewilderedly, but Binny waved her imperatively to silence.

"Go and see if you can grab a taxi — quick!" she urged.

She turned to where Farrance had come to the door of the sitting-room, nodding to him cheerfully and excitedly as she hastened to pull on her gloves.

"It's all right!" she assured him. "At least, it's going to be. You and Irma stay here awhile in case I'm back fairly soon. If I'm longer than an hour, don't wait. I'll have to go straight on to the theatre. Come to me there."

Binny was in her element. There was something to be done; something interesting, exciting, helpful. She was scenting battle from afar, and tingling with anticipated joy. Binny had been like that ever since her sadly neglected babyhood, or she would not have been one of the fit ones who survive. She grinned now at Farrance's blank stare, and made a movement towards the door.

He strode swiftly after her. "But . . . Good Heavens, Lola! Where are you going? What are you going to do?" His tone was disturbed, his eyes frowning.

Binny fastened the last glove button and grinned again. "I'm going to the office of the notorious Mr. Benjamin Clay. I'm going to have an interview with him, private and personal — and strictly confidential. If I'm at all good at guessing, I rather think I'm going to give him a nasty jolt. Anyway, I'm going to try and get ahead of Mr. Kyrle Harkness on the fairy godmother, amiable benefactor stunt! Beyond that I can't tell you anything, as I haven't the slightest idea of what's going to happen myself! So long!"

She paused at the grip of his hand upon her arm.

"Lola! Are you out of your mind? No one knows this man Clay, or what he's like. There's something altogether queer about him! You can't go to his office, alone. It's impossible!"

Binny shook her head. She freed her arm deftly and slipped across the threshold. At the kerb a taxi was purring, Sally panting by its side.

Binny grimaced at Farrance provocatively. "Not on your life, it isn't!" she assured him emphatically, and, before he could protest anew, pulled the door to neatly in his face.

Driving swiftly away from the flat, she lay back and laughed, but grew almost immediately sober again. She had spoken nothing but the truth when she had said that she had no idea of what was going to happen. Until this moment she had given no clear thought to what she was going to do or say when at last she stood face to face with Benjamin Clay. All that was in her mind was to help Irma Farrance, to free her and Terry from any obligation towards Kyrle Harkness. Beyond that her brain remained inactive.

In speaking of Mary Munro across the telephone, she had drawn a bow at a venture, urged thereto by that insidious, bewildering suspicion that the Benjamin Clay of her mother's life and the money-lender were one and the same. That the suspicion should prove correct took her breath away. Her eyes widened; she clenched her hands hard. Now she was beginning to think of other things besides those troubles of her friends: was beginning to think of this unknown Benjamin Clay not

just as a stranger. Her breath quickened, the wide eyes grew keen. She was frightened now at what she had done; more than a little perplexed at what she was to do. It was being borne in upon her that she still wore Lola Arnaut's identity. She had probed, recklessly, into the past as Binny Clay! She thanked the Providence that had hitherto guided her that she had said no more than that she knew of Mary Munro, had not otherwise committed herself.

After all, there was still time to think ahead, to collect herself, to make some sort of plan. She sighed and relaxed, unclenching her hands. But by the time she reached Clay's office, she was no nearer a conclusion as to how she might best deal with the situation; put her knowledge of the money-lender's past to account.

She had used Mary Munro's name, on an impulse, to force an interview. It occurred to her that, beyond gaining the interview, she was not much better off than before. Nevertheless, she was perfectly cool as she asked for Clay, stating that he had promised her an appointment. She followed a deferential person with somewhat shifty and suspicious eyes through luxurious offices into a small,

perfectly appointed, severely business-like but comfortable room, upon the door of which Benjamin Clay's name was written, and which was occupied by a keen, well-dressed, efficient-looking man of possibly fifty. His manner was smooth, suave, even deferential as he rose upon Binny's entrance. Her guide closed the door gently behind her, and disappeared, and Binny, instinctively on guard, watchful, halted upon the threshold. She stood waiting quietly for him to speak, cautious, as life had taught her to be cautious; aware of the fact that it is always better to let an opponent make the first move. She sensed, somehow, that this polished person was an opponent.

He said, at last: "Mr. Clay is not here. He never attends the office . . . or sees clients . . . personally. I am strictly in Mr. Clay's confidence — my name is Forbes."

He indicated a chair. Binny regarded it — and him — consideringly. Then she stiffened. Those fine nostrils of hers were ever so slightly dilated. Again she was scenting battle. She shook her head.

"I distinctly said over the 'phone that I wished to interview Mr. Clay personally. I gathered he agreed. If you will remind him

that I come with — er — some slight information concerning Mary Munro, I think he will prefer that my business is not transacted through a third person."

Forbes frowned, hesitated, and, meeting the determined young eyes, reached for the telephone. Binny turned her back and sauntered to the window. When she faced round again, Forbes was moving to the door.

"As I have said, Mr. Clay never comes here. But he will see you at his private residence. I will take you there."

Binny's eyes snapped. She pursed her lips, frowned, then sat down deliberately in the big padded chair.

"You've got another guess coming!" she informed him, somewhat inelegantly. "My friends know I'm here. Here I stay. I imagine you don't know who I am, or you'd be wise to the fact that I don't trail round after folks unnecessarily. They usually trail round after me. This being a business interview, I expect Mr. Clay to keep his appointment with me on his business premises. You might tell him so."

Mr. Forbes regarded her obliquely. He was curious, and Binny knew it. She concluded

that the theatre was not his favourite place of amusement, since he quite obviously did not know her, though her face might be familiar to him. She, however, gave him no further information, waiting serenely until, with a rather sullen murmur of protest, he spoke once more into the telephone.

She did not even look up at his: "Mr. Clay will come." Absorbed in thought, she was wondering just exactly how she would greet him when he did. She heard another murmur from Mr. Forbes, the sound of the closing door. Minutes passed; again she glanced at her watch, got up and walked about the room, frowning, and finally sat down again.

Five minutes later the door was opened.

"Mr. Clay!" impressively announced the unctuous voice of Mr. Forbes.

Binny turned her head. Then, with a little strangled cry, she sprang to her feet.

"Oh!" she said breathlessly, and stopped.

Against the dark oak panels, his rather pleasant face changing slowly from a mask of impassivity to utter amaze, looking her fully in the eyes, stood Kyrle Harkness.

XXVI

"Mr. Harkness!"

"Good Lord! Lola Arnaut!"

They exclaimed simultaneously, and stood mute for a moment afterwards, staring blankly, both of them bewildered, suspicious, questioning.

It was Binny who recovered herself first. Forbes had gone; Harkness made an instinctive movement as if to open the door and call him back. She checked it sharply, a small, ungloved hand uplifted.

"Wait!" The word was at once a command and an appeal.

Harkness, scarcely realizing what he was doing, took his fingers from the knob and advanced slowly a few paces into the room. Binny, wide-eyed, striving wildly to make order out of the chaos of her mind, drew an audible breath.

"Mr. Harkness!" she murmured again, and added, quickly, amazedly, before he could speak — "So you — *you*" — the astonishment in her eyes changed, suddenly, to an illumi-

nating comprehension — "you are Benjamin Clay! *You!*"

Harkness flushed a dull red. His hands were rather tightly clenched, his lips compressed. His whole face looked grim, hard, furiously angry.

Again Binny gestured, rather helplessly. "I did not know!" she assured him. "I had not the *slightest* idea of such a thing! I thought . . ." She stopped, grown quickly cautious. She was regaining her mental equilibrium, remembering Terry — Irma — the part Harkness had essayed to play in the lives of both.

For the immediate moment she decided to thrust herself, Mary Munro, and the latter's connection with Benjamin Clay into the immediate background; to keep before her only her object of helping the two who were her friends.

Alley cat that circumstances had made of her in her childhood, she was still ever wary, ever on the alert, ever suspicious. Now she was rapidly coming to the conclusion that it would be best to hold her hand, to let the war break in the enemy's camp. For herself, she was already making up her mind to use the weapon with which Fate had so unex-

pectedly armed her — the discovery that the mysterious and somewhat notorious Benjamin Clay and Kyrle Harkness were one and the same.

For the fact to become public would, she knew, seriously handicap Harkness in his social aspirations, if not actually damn any chance he might have of attaining to equality with Irma and her kind. A pleasant sense of having a very considerable advantage of him rose up within her, restoring her poise, giving her confidence. She waited, shrewd eyes upon his face.

Harkness broke the silence at last. "You thought — ? Well, what did you think, Miss Arnaut? And to what strange whim am I indebted for the honour of your visit?" His voice was cold.

Binny flushed and stirred, but her eyes hardened. The small chin went up. "Don't ride a high horse, Mr. Harkness. It won't help. As I have been telling you, my business was — is — with Benjamin Clay. I did not know that *you* were he."

Harkness's mouth was set in a very straight line. He said: "That is not surprising. Nobody does; nor is any one likely to!"

Binny blinked at him rather disconcertingly. "No? That is very satisfactory — if you'd rather they didn't."

Some quality in her voice made him look at her keenly, flushing anew; and a glint of steel grew in his eyes. Binny met them unwaveringly. The wild-rose deepened in her cheeks, the scent of battle was keener in her nostrils. She moved slowly nearer to the big writing-table, seating herself on its edge. Again, deliberately, exasperatingly, she waited for him to proceed.

He did so, keeping his voice cool with an obvious effort. Somehow, vaguely, he sensed a challenge in her smile, her unflurried gaze.

"Well? My dear Miss Arnaut, my time is valuable, and we're wasting it. . . . Your telephone message was to the effect that your business with me was to do with — ah — one Mary Munro."

Binny made a little gesture. "That doesn't matter now!" she announced startlingly, and with an audacity that surprised herself. "I mean," she added, as he stared, "it is of secondary consideration now that I know who you really are!" She swung herself up onto the table and sat regarding him with her hands

folded in her lap. "As you have pointed out, your time is valuable, Mr. Harkness. So's mine. I've got to be at the theatre pretty soon, and I want to get things squared up before I leave here. That being so, I'll go dead ahead." She tilted her head questioningly on one side; but Harkness crushed his hands into his pockets and did not answer.

"I knew," Binny proceeded in swift explanation, "that Benjamin Clay was inaccessible; that he would grant no personal interview to anybody. As it was imperative that I should see him personally, I suggested that my business was concerning Mary Munro. As a matter of fact — "

"One moment!" Harkness's voice was harsh. "What *do* you know of Mary Munro?"

For an instant Binny hesitated. Then she answered deliberately, and with the utmost simplicity: "That she was your wife. The mother of your child."

"*What?*" Harkness shouted the word at her, and she paled ever so slightly, but her eyes remained tranquil.

"I have proofs. The certificate of marriage — of the child's birth."

"The *child!* But . . . Good God!" He turned away from her, and began pacing up and down the room. That he was profoundly agitated was more than plain, and Binny watched him for a while, half frowning. He paused again at last, directly opposite to her. "I didn't know there was a child!" he said, and his voice was a shade hoarse; the angry colour had died leaving him curiously white. Then his eyes flashed searchingly, insistently upon hers. "How do *you* know these things, anyway?"

"I knew — the child," she said slowly. "I knew the woman who looked after her . . . kept her . . . after her mother went away."

"What else do you know?"

Binny shook her head. "Very little. Nothing of what occurred before the birth of the child, of where Mary Munro came from or of who she was." She was leaning a little forward, her lips slightly apart, conscious of a quickening eagerness and interest. "I came by my knowledge of her relationship to you by accident," she went on. "I used it to force an interview with you — so that I might speak to you upon another matter. I gathered from the woman who cared for her child that Mary

Munro had run away from her home to go on the stage." She paused.

Harkness's grim mouth twitched. "Yes. Only — really — she was driven away." He spoke without looking at her, his eyes the eyes of one looking far, far back into the past. He went on, almost as if unconscious of her presence: "I drove her away. We were cousins — really utterly unsuited — but we fancied ourselves in love. We were very young; she was romantic. Our people did not greatly approve of the match, and we chose to run away. We were married — after the Scotch fashion — before witnesses. And for a while we were happy. But only for a while. My dream was to make money, to go far. Mary's was to enjoy herself — to live among lights and laughter. . . . We came very soon to quarrelling, to the realization that we'd made a mistake. She wanted to go on the stage; I wouldn't hear of it. She threatened to defy me, urging that she wished she had never given up her freedom. I lost my head and my temper then. I told her that the form of marriage through which we had gone was not binding; not really legal . . . ." He paused.

Binny drew a deep breath. A queer stillness had fallen upon the room; the girl was shivering a little, the man staring back into the mists of the past.

"I believe," he went on, "that I was right. I am pretty sure, indeed. I never saw Mary again after that moment. I remember her as I flung out of the house — very white and still and scared. When I came back, she was gone. I don't know where; I never have known. I searched for her, remorseful, desperately disturbed, with every intention of having the marriage immediately legalized, but I never found her . . ." He stopped.

Again there was silence; then, jarringly, the telephone bell rang close to Binny's side. Impulsively, almost unconsciously, she caught up the receiver. A second later, himself again, cold, quiet, expressionless, Harkness came forward to take it.

But she waved him away. "The message is for me," she told him — "from Mr. Farrance. Yes? Oh, yes — I'm quite safe. I am with Mr. Clay in his private office. . . . Yes, if you like. Get here in about ten minutes. They'll ring up from downstairs and tell me when you're here. . . . Oh, yes,

I'll stay right here till you come. . . . 'Bye."

She set the receiver back carefully and looked up at Harkness. Once more her mind was on the business in hand. She said, quickly: "Anything else concerning Mary Munro that I know I can tell you later. You can call to-morrow, pretty nearly any time. Now I want to get at the reason of my visit here. I come from Irma Farrance. Rather, I come on her behalf, and upon Terry O'Farrer's."

She saw the flash of his eyes, and locked her hands tightly together. She went on before he could speak. "They are in love with each other, those two, Mr. — Harkness. They'll break their hearts if they're parted. They *will!*" She leaned forward catching at his arm. "I came to you to see if I could — get you to make things easier for them. You have Terry in your power. Now that I know who you are, I can imagine that you've deliberately drawn him into negotiations which he would otherwise never have made. You can ruin him. And because of this you — as Kyrle Harkness, influencing Benjamin Clay! — have coerced Irma into promising to marry you!"

Harkness took his hands out of his pockets and came nearer. Instinctively Binny slid her hand towards the telephone.

"Well?" There was something of fury in his voice, cold, implacable.

"Well," Binny echoed quietly, "I want you to give back all those papers, which are a menace to him, to Terry. I want you to set him free of all except fair and really honourable debt to you. I want you to cease to 'squeeze' him — and I want you to give Irma — now, at once, to-night — her freedom again!" She paused.

Harkness stared, then flung back his head and broke into harsh laughter. He sobered instantly, however, and Binny shrank a little from the expression in his eyes.

"So! You've got plenty of — er — may I be forgiven if I say impudence, Miss Arnaut? And may I ask why on earth I should accede, unprotestingly, to your amazing request?"

"Because," Binny assured him gravely, "it would be so much wiser — and pleasanter!"

"You mean?" Harkness's voice held a menace now.

Binny glanced at her wrist-watch and slid carefully from the table.

"I'm late," she murmured; then — "Oh, really Mr. Harkness!" she reproached him — "surely you're not, after all, a *stupid* man? Terry and Irma are my friends — my very good friends. And I hate seeing folks unhappy. You can make them happy. You've got to make them happy. If you don't — why, then, I shall probably be unpleasantly catty!"

She held up her hand as again he moved towards her: "Don't try any rough stuff!" she advised him coolly. "Dudley Farrance knows I'm here — that I shan't leave till he comes for me. He's probably downstairs now. . . . You can't harm me, and you can't stop me speaking. It's up to you whether or not I clear up the mystery of the identity of the notorious and not greatly loved — er — 'shark,' don't some folks call you? — Benjamin Clay! Now I guess I'll be going. Perhaps you'll think things over and 'phone through to the theatre. I'd like to put Irma's mind at rest as soon as possible — she'll want to contradict the rumor of her engagement to you as soon as possible."

She fluttered to the door, opened it, nodded cheerfully, and was gone.

XXVII

HARKNESS started in the direction of the closing door, stopped short and swung back to the table. He dropped heavily into the chair before it, and swore. Then, for a very long time, he sat there, staring straight ahead of him, his face grim and set and very still. Under scowling brows his eyes burned, with smouldering rage, with impotent resentment — and with memories.

He found himself looking back over years which had been barren of all but an overweening ambition and a craving to make money, to days when neither power nor wealth had been his. Since those days he had loved no woman until Irma Farrance had come into his life. He had had no time for love. His thoughts had dwelt only upon place and power; his determination had been to buy them, some day, somehow.

In Irma he had first seen one who could draw him up from the middle rungs of the social ladder upon which he stood to the summit, or within reach of it. With growing

acquaintance had awakened admiration; new desires had stirred in him. He had begun to think of the woman herself, as well as of those things she could help him attain. He had learned to care for her; had remembered that he was still but a little way over the borderland of youth, with many years before him.

Now he loved Irma as well as needed her help. His feeling for her had driven him to forcing her consent to a union. The battle had been hard, but he had won. Only to-day triumph had tasted sweet upon his lips. He had seen, in Irma's weary capitulation, another stepping-stone to the fulfilment of his ambition. He had fought and won! Success was his, already within his grasp. And then, out of a clear sky, had come a whisper of reminder, a breath from the past . . . Mary Munro's name.

He set his teeth hard, clenching his hands upon the edge of the table. Forbes, coming softly to the door, retreated hastily, amazed and startled by the unexpected snarl his employer flung at him. Day failed, and shadow shapes filled the room, and still Harkness sat on, motionless.

The interview with Binny had jarred him badly; the mention of Mary Munro left him shaken. His nerves were frayed, on edge. Once he rose and went to the window. He seemed to see Binny's face before him, determined, the wide eyes unwavering, grimly determined. They haunted him, those eyes, and he passed his hand across his own, vaguely wondering.

Then he shook himself savagely. A gust of rage against the girl rose within him; he was aware of an almost overwhelming impulse to ignore her utterly — her speech of a woman long since dead to him—her knowledge of who he was — her final, quiet threat of exposure.

Yet even as he stood again by the table, palms pressed down upon the polished oak, shoulders hunched, his brain was beginning to clear; gropingly he was reaching after facts, facing them grimly and unwillingly. He knew that Binny could do him infinite damage. He knew that the ball of scandal, set rolling, would be impossible to stop. He might deny for a while her assertion of his identity, but not for always. And with the truth blazoned abroad, all the hopes for which he had striven would come to naught. Irma's

people might tolerate Kyrle Harkness. In spite of his wealth, they would draw the line at Benjamin Clay, the money-lender.

He was a hard man, and, in his building up of fortune, he had been pitiless, unscrupulous. The world knew it. Benjamin Clay's reputation was one which would close all doors against him. Money might gild much, but not everything.

This girl, Lola Arnaut, had the whip-hand, without doubt. This girl whose success he had helped to finance. He laughed harshly, bitterly, then stood upright, squaring his shoulders. He knew that her threat was no idle one. He must free Irma, must confess his dealings with young O'Farrer outrageous and unfair; must loose the strangle-hold he had upon him. He must stand aside, content himself with that which was already his; must turn his eyes from those giddy heights towards which he had been straining for so long. It was bitter knowledge, and he fought a bitter battle. But long ago Harkness had learned to accept defeat stoically, as well as success. Binny had turned his weapons of coercion against himself. To Binny the victory.

Slowly, very reluctantly, he reached his

hand to the receiver of the telephone. He rang Lola Arnaut at the theatre. After a wait, to him, chafing, furious, a wait that was intolerable, he heard her voice. It was smooth, perfectly controlled. But there was a note of eagerness, of anxiety in it, and he smiled grimly.

"Harkness speaking!" he announced brusquely. Yet his tone held a quality of laconic calm that sent a little tingle of admiration through Binny. "I guess you've played your ace, Miss Arnaut. Here . . . as you might possibly put it yourself . . . is where I get off! Good-bye!"

. . . . . .

Dudley Farrance, after an interminable wait in the vestibule of Benjamin Clay's building of offices, had fumed helplessly throughout an all too rapid drive to the theatre.

Binny, bright of eye, flushed of cheek, had vouchsafed no information of any sort. "I can't tell you anything!" she had declared. "I haven't time. Besides, I'm not *quite* sure yet how things are going to turn out. But I'll know pretty soon, and — and, oh, Dudley! Tell Irma I think it's going to be all right! That I'm nearly *sure* it is! . . . And find

Terry! He's not likely to be in a fit state of mind to be knocking round by himself."

Now, huddled in a flowered, silken wrap, only half dressed for the second act, and with Sally clucking and snorting impatiently in the background, she greeted an O'Farrer in whose haggard cheeks a bright spot of colour burned, whose eyes were blazing with a light that made her catch her breath.

Impulsively, eagerly, she stretched her hands towards him. "Terry! It's all right! There's nothing to worry about any more. Oh, for my sake, don't look like that! I'll howl if you do, and my make-up will be spoiled. It *is* all right, I tell you!"

"I know!" The boy released her hands and made a helpless movement of his own. "I know! I've heard from Clay!"

"Already!" Binny's eyes opened wide, then an odd little smile of admiration twisted her lips. "Some hustler!" she commented, drily. Then: "Tell me — quick!"

Terry ran his fingers through his hair. "There's scarcely anything to tell! A packet came to my rooms — by special messenger, to-night — not fifteen minutes ago. There was a note in it signed by Clay; a bare half-dozen

words, admitting that his dealings with me had not been just or fair. He sent me back my letters — my notes of hand — every blessed paper that would give him any kind of hold over me — torn into small pieces! Oh, good Lord! I can't understand it!"

Binny breathed long, and deep, and happily. "All you need to understand, little man," she assured him — "that there's nothing to worry about any more; nothing that's of any real importance, anyway. Mr. Clay, having seen the error of his ways, has made amends . . . generously. I guess you can leave it at that."

"Yes, but — " He stopped at the sound of a light tap on the door.

Sally, grunting, answered it; stood aside for Farrance to enter. He looked quickly from his friend to Binny. He answered the eager question of her eyes immediately: "I've come from Irma. She had to keep a dinner engagement, but she'll be round later. She wants me to tell you that she has heard from Harkness. Here's his letter."

Binny took it, and read rapidly:

DEAR MISS FARRANCE,

I have been thinking very seriously concerning our conversation, and subsequent understanding,

of last night; and I feel that, in my eagerness for the happiness that only you can give me, I have shown myself in somewhat sorry colours. I feel, too, that to insist upon fulfilment of your promise to me, under the circumstances, would be to forfeit your respect.

Therefore, if you can be generous enough to show forgiveness by permitting me to retain, in small measure, your friendship, I shall ever be most sincerely your grateful and humble slave, and will try and make myself content with a greater boon than, I admit, I deserve.

Wishing you whole-heartedly, happiness now, and in the future

Yours to command always
KYRLE HARKNESS

"O — oh!" Binny crooned. She handed the letter to Terry, squeezing his arm. "Oh! But that's pretty white—*and* diplomatic! As a Chink would say, our friend, Mr. Harkness, 'saves much face'! Terry, my son, get a move on, and hike along in quest of your beloved. . . . I'll give you my blessing later in the evening. At the immediate moment I've got to see how quickly I can get dressed within a limit of seven minutes! The curtain goes up in four! Shoo! Vamoose! Go out and look stunned in the corridor!"

She whirled upon Farrance, urging both

men impatiently towards the door. "You, too! Sally'll have an apoplectic fit in a minute!"

She met Farrance's faintly sullen gaze of resentment with a disarming smile. "Don't be cross!" she pleaded. "It's been *such* an evening. And I *must* get dressed. But you can come along and talk to me if you like, after the second act. I'm not on until the end of the third . . . and I'll explain all that's explainable then. Afterwards we'll have supper somewhere. I think this is distinctly an occasion for celebration. Now, for the love o' Mike, both of you — *git!*"

Yet when they had gone she did not immediately move, but stood looking straight ahead of her. At Sally's exasperated reminder of the flight of time, she sighed and stirred.

"I was thinking!" she apologized. And added to her vivid image in the mirror, "I must say I've got to take off my hat to Benjamin Clay for carrying through a deal promptly — and for not squealing when he's licked!" Then she grinned, gamin-like and joyously, albeit with a certain wistfulness, remembering whose daughter she was.

XXVIII

Binny played her part that night somewhat mechanically. She was weary physically and mentally; yet she was keenly alive to her responsibilities and to her audience.

To one of its members her eyes strayed more than once, in a vague interest and question. He was an old man, prematurely old, Binny thought, white of hair, bent of shoulder, but with eyes eagle-bright that seldom, if ever, left her lightly moving form. Regularly throughout the run of the show she had seen him in the theatre, nearly always in the same seat . . . always with eyes intently, even greedily, fixed upon hers. He had at first intrigued, then annoyed her. Yet there was nothing of amorous admiration in his gaze, nothing even of appreciation in the hard, lined, white old face. Rather, at times, it had seemed to her there was condemnation. Certainly there was wonder.

Once, to-night, she saw him moved from his customary calm, his seeming indifference, his disregard of his surroundings. He had

glanced, casually, up to the boxes, and into one of them Gustav De Mille had just entered with a party of rather noisy men. Binny followed the old man's gaze, then, frowning at recognition of De Mille, brought her glance back to his face again. It was deadly white now, and he had half risen in his seat. His eyes were blazing, his lips twitching convulsively. Again, involuntarily, she looked up at De Mille. As if drawn by the fiery, angry eyes, he was standing at the ledge of the box, looking down. And as she watched him, his face changed. He drew back sharply, as if seeking to hide himself. It seemed to her that there was a new fear in his face; she felt, and wondered at, the swift, furtive, expressively questioning glance he flung towards herself.

Then the old man relaxed into his seat; his sombre gaze dwelt upon her once more; she went through her final dance aware of the burning intentness of his eyes, and of the fact that Gustav De Mille had ceased to be hilarious, and had slumped into his seat, half hidden by the velvet curtain, surreptitiously mopping his forehead. She was uncomfortably conscious of a certainty that there was something

wrong, but she shrugged herself out of her uneasy mood as she ran up to her dressing-room.

Arrived there, she found Sally sniffing over a folded piece of paper, evidently torn from a notebook, and a great bunch of violets.

"Mr. Farrance sent them up," she announced as Binny pounced upon them. "Said he'd be coming along himself ten minutes after the fall of the curtain. Will you be changing at once into your clothes for the last of the act? Or shall I come back later?"

Binny, her face buried in the violets, shook her head. "I'll change now," she said. "It's plain evening dress and I can get out of it without any trouble by myself. You trot along home, Sally. I can see by your eyes you've got a splitting head, and there's really no need to wait — I can manage beautifully for myself. Just get me into the other frock, and I'll be all right."

Sally pressed a throbbing temple, and beamed gratefully. "Came on all of a sudden!" she declared. "Was right as rain 'alf an hour ago when I was havin' my stout. . . . Mr. De Mille sent the note up, Miss Lola. I'd a mind to burn it."

Binny frowned. She put down the violets, and unfolded the piece of paper. A few words in De Mille's hand, scrawled not very steadily, wandered across the surface.

Coming up to your dressing-room after the show or a little before. Got to see you most particularly. Avening's here, and looks like murder — thought I'd warn you, in case the old boy sees fit to kick up a shindy.

G. De M.

Binny tore the note into tiny pieces and let them fall. She was angry: but she was also puzzled.

"Avening!" she repeated bewilderedly. Sally, a white lace gown over her arm, looked at her questioningly.

"Who" — Binny questioned, not overhopefully — "is Mr. Avening, Sally? Do *you* know?"

"Not from Adam!" Sally asserted positively, and set to work unfastening hooks.

Binny sighed, shrugged, frowned, and picked up the violets again. The thought of De Mille jarred her from her pleasant mood; the remembrance of the old man in the stalls, with the fiery, earnest eyes, haunted her uncomfortably. . . .

She turned with a sigh of genuine relief as a tap came upon the door. Sally admitted Farrance, bringing with him, obviously to his annoyance, Terry and Irma.

The latter ran quickly to Binny. "Lola! What does it all mean?" she demanded. "I'm so dazed I don't know where I am — I can't even be *happy* — yet! I'm afraid!"

Binny laughed down at her, and up at Terry. "You needn't be!" she asserted. "Terry's quite big enough to take care of you — now!"

"But what happened? What did you do? *Why* did you go rushing off to that abominable Clay like that — and what did you do to him?" Irma's voice was shrill with excitement.

Binny did not answer quite at once. Then she sighed. "There's so little, really, to tell you," she said. "I knew a girl . . . . once, long ago . . . . named Clay." She shivered suddenly, crushing the violets tighter to her breast. "She spoke once of — of her people to me. Some one belonging to her was named Benjamin Clay. I began to wonder — quite a time ago — if Terry's Benjamin Clay and the girl's Benjamin Clay were one and the

same. To-night — when you were so unhappy — I thought I'd try a bit of bluff. I spoke of that girl over the telephone to Benjamin Clay — I gained a private interview with him in that way. And then . . . well, I just talked!" She grinned, reminiscently.

Terry grinned too. "*And* some!" he hazarded.

But Irma's mood was not yet frivolous. She clung to Binny's hands. "I can see you don't want to say any more — " she began.

Binny interrupted mildly: "There's nothing more to say!"

"But," Irma persisted, "I'll never forget what you've done for me — for us both. Never, never, not till I'm an old lady with white hair and a querulous disposition, and Terry walks about on two sticks!"

"Whisht, woman!" Terry interrupted heatedly. "Please the saints, that I'll never be doing! As for being an old lady" — he took her suddenly and bodily into his arms, in a new, possessive, passionately tender certainty of ownership — "you'll never be that, acushla! And if you are, it'll be the loveliest old lady that ever brought sunshine into a topsy-turvy world!"

He placed her on her feet an instant later, turning to Binny. "I don't know what to say," he said in a swift revulsion of spirit. "I can't thank you. I don't even know what you've really done. I can only be grateful, humbly and everlastingly! You've done so much. I'd like to do something, too, for you."

Binny blinked, conscious of a sudden moisture on her lashes. "You dears!" She slid a hand into his, stretching out the other to Irma. "And, if it comes to that, you can! Be yourselves. Live your own lives. Fight for yourselves and each other, and don't give a tinker's cuss for any one, high or low, who wants to interfere with you! Stick to each other through thick and thin — love each other — and work! It's pretty crude advice. But it has its points, believe *me!*"

"I do!" Terry spoke soberly, his hand gripped so hard upon hers that she winced. "And — we will!" He turned to Irma.

The latter smiled unsteadily, in absolute acquiescence. "All the same," she said, after a moment, "I don't understand — even now!"

"You don't need to!" Binny assured her promptly. "Just grab what the gods have

given you, and be mighty thankful you've got it . . . seeing it's what you want!"

Terry held out his arms. Across Irma's head Binny met Dudley Farrance's eyes and smiled gladly, but with a mist of tears in her own.

"Curtain!" she said softly.

. . . . . .

With the closing of the door Farrance's arms went about her. She struggled for a moment, resisting instinctively, without knowing why; then suddenly, with a sob, she grew unexpectedly limp and lay still, her eyes closed, her head against his arm, her mouth upturned to his. A queer, bewildering, unlooked-for mood of surrender was upon her. The feeling she had been harbouring in her heart for this man, damming it rigorously, refusing to think upon it greatly, rose up and overwhelmed her. She sobbed again as his lips found hers — her hands went up, close and tight about his neck, straining him nearer. And Farrance, stammering for words, fell dumb, content to read the light in her wet eyes, with the promise of her tremulous lips.

They did not hear the opening of the door. They did not know that they were not alone

until, from the threshold, a voice spoke — mocking, yet savage, too; a voice that brought Binny free from Farrance's arms at a spring, her hands against her throat.

"Gustav!"

De Mille made a little gesture. He closed the door firmly behind him, and stood with his hand upon the knob. Farrance took a step forward, and paused at the supplication of Binny's outflung hand.

De Mille smiled. "You expected me," he murmured suavely, but with something in his tone that made the girl clench her hands — "not quite so soon?" He did not look at Farrance. His eyes were on Binny.

She met them, at first aghast, then with a swift flare of resentment and anger in her own. "How dare you!" She flung the challenge at him fiercely.

He shrugged. "It occurs to me," he said, again with an alien quiet that struck a queer chill to Binny's heart, "that I have dared — during the last few weeks — too little! My dear Lola! Even you must concede me certain rights to — er — object to a scene such as I have just witnessed?"

The hand against Binny's throat tightened.

She flung one glance at Farrance, and caught her breath. Then her head went up. "Rights!" she echoed scornfully. "*You!*" She controlled herself with an effort, and pointed to the door. "You will go," she said quietly — "at once. And I tell you here, and now, and for good and all, that I deny that you have any rights — either to control or criticize any action of mine!"

"So?" De Mille's lips twisted slightly. He met the challenge of Binny's eyes with answering challenge. "*So?* . . . "

He paused as Farrance took a step forward. "Miss Arnaut," Farrance said, "is going to marry me."

"So!" De Mille echoed the word softly, exasperatingly, for a third time. "My dear Lola! I knew you'd nerve, but I never guessed you'd try and pull a bluff like this! May I ask — are you also going to deny that you're my wife?"

XXIX

THERE was an instant of blank silence. Then Binny laughed, a little scornful, angry laugh.

"You're drunk, Gustav!" she informed him bluntly. "Don't you think it would be as well to get out of this room before you make yourself any more unpleasant, and have to be thrown out?"

De Mille's eyes flickered over her mockingly; and, somehow, something in their unusual assurance struck an odd little chill to the girl's heart. Involuntarily she moved a step nearer to him, a swift passion of resentment shaking her.

"I've warned you already," she said tensely — "*and* I meant it, that I'll not stand for any kind of interference or annoyance from you. I've told you what the consequences will be — to you — if you do not leave me and my affairs absolutely and completely alone. And I wasn't bluffing. I meant what I said!"

De Mille's fleeting smile was ugly — and

triumphant. "I'm not bluffing either," he assured her. "And *I* mean what *I* say! You can't get away with it, Lola. It's no use. You've gone just a step too far, old girl. No — wait!"

He lifted a shaky hand silencingly, and went on, ignoring Farrance's angry growl, Binny's passionate gesture. "I've been waiting to have my say — and I'm going to. Listen, my dear. You thought, as soon as you found you were somebody and something — making a success — money, gaining real popularity, that you'd be through with me. You told me so; you made it very clear that, unless I took a back seat and left you entirely to your own devices, you'd go deliberately out of your way to put me in Queer Street. You remember?"

Binny's lip lifted. As ever, a challenge fired her blood. She stiffened ever so slightly, preparing instantly for the fray. At her side Farrance made a quick movement. She glanced at him, and a faint shadow of distress, of pain dawned in her eyes. But she answered De Mille quite steadily. "I remember."

She was watching him closely, ever so faintly puzzled by his manner. He was drunk,

perhaps, but only sufficiently so to make his mood ugly, so ugly that he was on the verge of throwing all caution to the winds. She added quickly: "I remember, Gustav. But — is it altogether a wise move on your part to act this way? Are you going to do yourself any good by it?"

De Mille laughed. "I don't know!" he retorted. "But I do know that I'm going to do you a damned lot of harm! See here, I told you that night I'd make you pay. I'm going to." He straightened himself and came from the door.

Farrance made a movement to step between them, but Binny checked him. Her face was rather white; there was something in De Mille's expression that puzzled her, made her vaguely uneasy, but she waited quietly enough, watching him steadily.

"Listen. You've managed to climb right up to the top. You've taken your fling. You're successful — making money — getting in the limelight. But you've made one mistake. You've been in cahoots with me too long, Lola, to treat me like dirt when you don't need me any more. I've kept in the background, all right, all right — but I

haven't been blind. I've kept my mouth shut, and my eyes open." He paused, and for a second his glance dwelt upon Farrance. Again he smiled. "You're pretty clever, Lola! But folks can occasionally be just *too* clever. I've stood for you flirting with Farrance here; and I might have stood for the rest, even for the bluff of going through the farce of marriage with him, if you'd played the game with me, if you'd been square and let me in on the spoils, as in the old days. But now — here's where I spill the beans, good and plenty."

Binny drew a breath that was scarcely audible. Sideways, she looked at Farrance. A flutter of fear was in her heart; yet she waited, quiet, ever alert.

"I might have waited a little longer, of course — might have let you marry, and then turned the tables and taken to threatening in my turn. You wouldn't have found it pleasant to be brought up on a bigamy charge; only . . ."

"You damned cad!" Of a sudden Farrance's hands were upon the other's shoulders. "If you open your lips again, I'll break your neck!" He glanced at Binny. "Open the

door!" he ordered peremptorily. "I'm going to throw him out."

De Mille did not move, and, unexpectedly, meeting his eyes, Binny shivered. "I shouldn't!" De Mille said smoothly. "You wouldn't get over-much sympathy, you know — kickin' a chap out of his own wife's dressing-room!" He twisted himself deftly free and stood back a little. "Believe me, Farrance, you're the goat! This very charming lady, known publicly as Lola Arnaut, is in reality Mrs. Gustav De Mille!"

"It's a lie!" Binny flashed forward, eyes ablaze. Her hands were clenched, her breath coming unevenly. "It's a lie!" she cried again. "A lie — a *lie!*"

De Mille looked at her mockingly, yet with some perplexity. "Lord, Lola!" he expostulated. "Don't you know when it's time to quit? I'm speaking the truth, and you know it! What's the use of keeping up the bluff?"

"It's a lie!" Binny's voice rose shrilly, and ceased. Her lips had begun to quiver. There was something of panic in her soul. Wildly she was trying to remember that precious diary of the real Lola's — that never-failing store of information from which she

had gleaned so much. A growing bewilderment and horror was upon her. She watched De Mille, fascinated, as with a slight shrug he slipped his hand into his pocket.

"I shouldn't make a statement like this without proof!" he retorted. "If Mr. Farrance cares to glance at this bit of paper, he'll see that it is a certificate of marriage . . . . *our* marriage. In addition to which Avening — your father — is in the theatre. He can testify that you ran away with me — married me — and that he disowned you in consequence!"

Binny put out a hand gropingly and felt for the back of a chair. She had grown suddenly very cold. The room was whirling round her, and for a moment she closed her eyes. Desperately she struggled to collect herself, piteously aware of De Mille's triumphant smile, and the stricken unbelief of Dudley Farrance's white face.

The blow that De Mille had struck, so suddenly, so utterly unexpectedly, was devastating. Never once had she dreamed of the possibility that the dead woman who had been her sister had married this man; never once had such a thought occurred to her. In all

the diary there had been no hint, no merest suggestion of such a thing. She lifted her hands and put them against her throbbing temples. The world was still rocking about her; she felt giddy, even a little faint. A sickening sense of helplessness was upon her. She could not even think clearly. She could only tell herself that she had, after all, been a fool — had, for all her cleverness, made more than one mistake. She had overlooked two things — the possibility that her sister had been more to De Mille than merely his tool, and the fact that her name was not really Arnaut.

Avening! She thought of the old man in the stalls with the burning eyes — remembered how he had watched her — the bitterness of the look he had flung at De Mille. She wondered what would have happened if she had met him face to face, before De Mille's revelation of the marriage. How seriously would she have betrayed herself? Truly, there had been more pitfalls in her path of deceit than even she had imagined! She knew an impulse to laugh, but it was gone immediately. She let her hands fall heavily to her sides, and drew a deep breath.

She looked once at De Mille — a flash of undying defiance — and then, rather pitifully, at Farrance. "I guess," she conceded, very wearily, "that the game's up!"

XXX

BINNY was never very clear as to what happened immediately after that. It seemed to her that a great distance lay between her and the two men — that her surroundings were unreal and indistinct. From the mists that clouded her mind she heard the sound of Dudley Farrance's voice. Somehow it made her wince, stabbed her to a keener consciousness of what was happening.

"Lola! For God's sake . . . . you don't mean that?"

She looked at him stupidly, questioningly. She wanted to speak, wanted to give some sort of explanation, but she could not. Instead she shook her head, turning slowly away. But an instant later, at the sound of the opening door, she swung round again, a quick, cold fear at her heart. Of a sudden it dawned upon her that Farrance had seen the wrong meaning in her words — that he believed she was confessing the truth of De Mille's statement. With a smothered cry she ran forward . . . the wail of the violins came floating

faintly up — a breath of overhot air was wafted into the room, then the door closed. She found herself standing with outstretched palms pressed against the panels, and De Mille laughing softly at her elbow.

For a full minute she stood quite still. Then, as rapidly as they engulfed her, the mists rolled away from her brain. She was, amazingly, herself again, capable, self-possessed, her mind crystal clear. A little shaken, a little breathless. But that was all. She glanced up at the clock, and was amazed to see that a bare fifteen minutes had passed since De Mille had entered the room. Those minutes had seemed to her like hours. She turned from the door and crossed steadily to the dressing-table, picking up a bottle of cologne and wetting her handkerchief with it. She held it for several seconds against her forehead, and then, bending closer to the glass, touched her face lightly with a powder-puff. Her hand scarcely shook, but the line of her mouth was grim and hard, the look in her eyes strangely determined. She sighed as she set the puff down. The end of the game had come quicker than she had anticipated. It was all over.

She looked at herself in the mirror, and her lips twisted in a smile. It was a curious smile, half triumphant, half wistful. De Mille, watching her, wondered. She caught his gaze upon her and the smile died. But beyond that she did not show that she was heeding him at all. Her thoughts were very far away, very complicated.

The game was played; the comedy was finished. She had known triumph, success, applause — she had tasted some of the joy of fame. She had worked, and known her work good. She had deceived, but in the beginning she had done so with a set purpose. That purpose she had accomplished — almost. Her eyes narrowed and gleamed as she looked at De Mille again. Almost — but not quite. There was something yet for her to do. Afterwards . . . Afterwards, she did not know. She could not know.

She thought of Farrance, and a lump rose in her throat. A gust of passionate pain, of regret, of longing shook her. What would he think? What would he say? He who from the beginning had done so much for her, been so stanch a friend. Remembering the sure clasp of his arms, the passion of his kisses,

she closed her eyes. At least, she whispered to herself, he would know the real truth. He would know that whatever else she might have done she had loved him honestly; had, in her feeling for him, deceived him not at all; would know that no other had held any place in her life.

She lifted her lids, and looked at De Mille. He had followed her into the room, and stood just behind her.

"And what," he asked mockingly, "I wonder, are you going to do now, friend Lola?"

Binny turned abruptly, facing him, her hands against the dressing-table. She did not reply at once, but seemed to be weighing her answer, and there was an odd look of growing purpose in her small face. Presently she glanced once more at the clock.

"First," she said, with great deliberation, "I'm going to see the show through. Then I'm going to find Mr. Van Bevan and make a clean breast of things. Tell him that I've been cheating all this time, impersonating another woman — that I'm an impostor."

She sighed, catching a quivering lower lip between her teeth. But her eyes dwelt steadily on the man's blank face.

"I'm going to tell him the truth. That I went that night to Delorme's to right a wrong — a terrible wrong; that I stayed, tempted beyond my strength, by the amazing freak of nature which had fashioned me so completely in the image of Lola Arnaut that not even her most intimate friends questioned my identity; to fill, if only a time, her shoes — to grasp her opportunities — to make a way to prosperity and success along the path she had been following."

She passed her hand lightly across her forehead. The room was insufferably close and hot; she felt breathless, heavy. She seemed to see De Mille's face through a slight haze still, though her mind had never been clearer, and his voice, when he spoke, was distinct, even loud.

"Mother of Heaven!" he was stammering, over and over again, thickly, meaninglessly. "Mother of Heaven!" He was livid, white-lipped, but at the look growing in his eyes she shuddered.

She went on slowly. "Afterwards I shall go to the police. I shall tell them, also, the truth: the truth of what happened that night before I came to Delorme's . . . that night,

Gustav De Mille, *when you strangled Lola Arnaut to death!*"

"It's a lie!" De Mille's voice rose nearly to a scream, broke, and died chokingly. His hands went out, clawlike, shaking, towards her. "You devil from hell! It's a lie! I didn't kill you — you *are* Lola Arnaut! You . . . you . . ." He stopped.

Binny shook her head. "No!" she said, "I'm not Lola Arnaut. Lola Arnaut is dead — murdered. And, Gustav De Mille, you'll hang for her — don't make the least mistake about that!"

De Mille's hands dropped slowly to his side. His mouth was twitching horribly; there was stark fear in his eyes; then, in a moment, it passed. A fleck of colour came back to his cheeks, he flung back his head and laughed.

"The age of miracles has passed!" he cried. "Do you suppose any sane person would believe that — off the pictures or out of a book — any woman could be so absolutely like another, an utter stranger, as to . . ."

"Lola Arnaut was not a stranger! The mother who bore her, bore me. That knowledge — the knowledge of her relationship to

me — was what made me follow Lola that night. I was down and out — I wanted help — I hoped and believed she could give it to me. . . . But that doesn't matter now. All that matters is that I was there; that I know you were in the car with her — that I heard you quarrelling and that I found her dead!"

"And who'll believe you? *No one!* No one *could* believe you! The whole world knows that you are in love with Farrance; expects you to marry him. Your father, Henry Avening, will identify you, absolutely, as his daughter. His daughter, who was married to me! Farrance will believe — every one will believe — that you have trumped up this yarn to save your own skin from the consequences of your connection with me in certain matters — *if* you go so far as giving me away — and to make out that you are free to marry Dudley Farrance, after all!"

Binny made a little passionate movement, but he waved her to silence.

"I tell you, nowadays, that sort of thing won't go down! It's too far-fetched — too utterly impossible! You can't get away with

it, my girl! *You can't get away with it* . . . and you know it! The very fact that *now* you don't *want* to be Lola Arnaut will dish you . . . ." He came to a breathless pause.

Binny was swaying a little where she stood, her eyes dilated, her lips pinched. It was being borne in upon her slowly that there was truth in what he said. The story she had to tell was so utterly fantastical, so seemingly impossible: her reason for casting aside her rôle so obvious — now. Lola Arnaut was Gustav De Mille's wife — his accomplice in nefarious dealings — his tool.

She pressed her hands to her eyes, visualizing the incredulity that would greet her story. A horrible sensation of being in a net, unable to free herself, was upon her. She felt that she was choking, and let one hand slide down to her throat. The mist between her and De Mille's leering face was growing; she knew a strange difficulty in breathing. Vaguely, from a great distance, she was aware of a confused rise and fall of voices — of some strange, persistent noise.

Above it she heard De Mille's voice again: "You can't get away with it! You can't get away with it! . . . ."

At the same instant an instinctive sense of danger, of some creeping peril sent her flying past him to the door. She wrenched it open, and fell back with a gasp. The acrid, choking smell of burning sent the tears blindingly to her eyes. One end of the passage was clear, the end leading to the stairs and the street. Along the other, thickening with every swift second, dense, ominous, were writhing, whirling volumes of smoke. From the distant auditorium she could just faintly catch the sound of voices — of screaming, shouting . . .

With a sobbing gasp she turned and looked back at De Mille. "The theatre's on fire!" she cried; and even as the words left her lips there came an uproar of voices from the street far below the windows. A flame shot up, without, blinding, lurid . . . It seemed to sear Binny's brain and heart, to cleave the curtain of misgiving and helplessness that hung heavy upon her, to light a way — amazingly, blindingly — from the morass in which she groped.

Even as De Mille, white-lipped, horrified, sprang for the door, she drew it closed again with a crash, turned the key in the lock, and wrenched it from the keyhole. Before,

dazed with amaze at her action, he could stop her, she was at the window. Panting, she flung it up. As she did so the lights in the room behind her went out. From the floor below another flame shot up — the street below was a sea of bellying smoke and insidious, searing swords of flame. Involuntarily the girl recoiled. Then her arm lifted. The key of the door went hurtling down into the hell seething below them . . .

"Great God!" De Mille's hands were gripping her arms, dragging her back, bruising her cruelly; De Mille's face, agonized with fear, was close to her own — and Binny, in a sudden frenzy of triumph, stood silhouetted against the welter of smoke and brazen reflection from the fire and laughed at him. She laughed as he shook her, flung her from him — laughed as she picked herself up, and stood panting against the wall. And then she ceased. At the window De Mille was battering with desperate hands at the framework and screaming thinly into the lurid nothingness that was below.

Her voice, flat, yet singularly clear above the increasing hiss and roar, brought him round upon her, mouthing meaningless

curses. "Listen!" she cried. "You're trapped. That's a side street below the windows. Even if they realize we're here, they couldn't get to us because of the flames — the fire appears to be below us. You can't get out that way. You're not strong enough to batter down that door — and I've thrown away the key! Do you understand? *I've thrown away the key!*" She dashed aside the hands that clutched at her, panting.

"Listen! If you *could* get out of that door, you could escape. The passage to the stairs and the street is still clear . . . that's probably why they'll never give heed to us. It will be believed that we got away long ago . . . We could get away still! But you can't open the door." She turned her face to the window. The room was alight now, and she stiffened herself, keeping him back from her with an outflung arm.

"Wait!" she commanded. "I've got another key. Another key that will open that door. It's here, in this room, but you wouldn't be able to find it unless I should tell you where to look. And without that key you'll die like a rat in a trap, Gustav De Mille!"

She did not hear what he shrieked at her; she just stood there, eyes burning, body tense, a small, stiff smile on her lips. Above the tumult of his words she went on, watching him as he began to stumble round the room, searching, groping, whimpering, in a desperate, maddened seeking for the key to freedom, liberty, life.

"You won't find it, Gustav: not until it's too late, anyway; not before the passage outside is choked with smoke, the stairway a hell of flame! Not before then, friend Gustav! Not before then. *But*" — she ran to him suddenly, gripping his arm, compelling his attention — "but I'll barter it to you! I'll tell you where it is — give you a chance to open that door, to save your life — even to make a clear get-away! — I'll do that, Gustav, if you'll write, here and now, a full confession of why, and when, and where you killed Lola Arnaut!"

XXXI

De Mille staggered and recovered himself. His eyes were staring, horribly. They sought the girl's, at first uncomprehendingly, then with a dawning light of understanding. His lips twisted in a grin of rage; wildly he struck her and sent her reeling.

"Damn you!" he screamed. "Damn you! *Damn you!* . . . Give me the key! . . ."

Binny began to cough. The blow had flung her against the dressing-table and she hung there, gasping. Through the open window the smoke was beginning to curl — a seeking flame licked round the sill. Fighting for breath, she pointed, and De Mille screamed again. . . .

At the sound Binny caught her hands up over her ears. But she spoke, swiftly, incisively: "It's for you to choose — for you to decide. Only — there's not much time." She coughed again, swaying. "Listen! Long ago — when I first began to realize how deep I was in this affair — I wrote an explanation of what I had done, and why. I told how

I had learned that Lola Arnaut was my sister, my half-sister. I gave every detail of my life in Fulgarth Street as Binny Clay. You wouldn't understand that — and it doesn't matter now." She turned from the table and staggered to the window, gasping. The heat drove her back, and she faced him grimly. "You've got to listen! . . . I gave the name of the woman who had brought me up, of my mother — of the few neighbours I had known. I described in detail the clothes I was wearing that night: described how I waited for Lola, followed the car, jumped on the footboard. I described you, and seeing you get into the car while it was waiting. I stated everything that happened from the moment I found that Lola was dead! Everything is written in that statement, and the chauffeurs' stories—Dudley Farrance's man's, and that of the man who helped me carry her up to my room — should be some proof of the truth of what I've said. Your confession would be absolute proof!"

De Mille was beating on the door, now, flinging himself against the panels. Over his shoulder he cried at her, wildly: "Give me the key! Oh, God! Give me the key!"

Binny, swaying still, made her stumbling way to a table in the corner. A blotter and note-paper lay upon it, the edges of the paper curling in the increasing heat.

"I'll give it to you — if you'll write the truth. Only you must be quick. You must be very quick. Look!" She flung a hand towards the door. Beneath it thin spirals of smoke were creeping in.

De Mille ceased to batter on the panels and turned to face her. He was ashen, shaking so that he could scarcely stand. For a moment he stood rocking, then he ran to her side, clutched the pen she held to him. Above him she stood, her hands against her throbbing throat.

"Sally saw me sign," she murmured, half dreamily. "The paper's tied up and sealed in Lola's diary. Sally has it. I told her — to keep it: to give it to Dudley — if anything — should happen to me. You see" — her lips twisted in the semblance of a smile — "I was never quite sure of you — or what you might do. I never guessed things would be like this. Sally saw me sign it — weeks ago, so — with what you're writing now — it ought to make things clear . . . . . "

From somewhere below there came a crash. Through the smoke without, now beginning to pour in through the window, a shower of sparks went up. There came the sound of hoarse shouting. De Mille made as if to spring to his feet, but the girl's hands were on his shoulders.

"Write!" she urged. "And write truly. It will not do to waste time."

"Damn you!" he sobbed, but his pen flew — and Binny, standing above him, watched. She snatched the page from him as at last he dropped the pen, folded it, thrust it low into her gown. She was stifling, choking, and half blinded by the smoke, but with sure, desperate hands she felt among the litter of letters and papers at the back of the table. A second later she was at the door, where De Mille raged.

The dreamy sense of unreality left her. Life beat up within her, calling to her. Sudden terror of the death she had braved, unheeding and uncaring only a few minutes since, drove her to her knees, feeling for the keyhole. She found it at last, turned the key, flung the door wide. On the threshold they stood together. A surging wave of smoke drove them back,

but at the stair end the passage was still clear — a Heaven-sent breath of clean air met them.

Binny, eyes closed, was clinging to the lintel of the door. Her strength was suddenly gone. She felt De Mille rush past her, and called to him, indistinctly. He turned in his stride, and looked back. Against the smoke, lit by the flames behind them, she saw his face. His arm lifted.

"Damn you!" he reiterated, savagely, and struck. Then, turning, he ran towards the stairs.

XXXII

Out of a nightmare of horror Binny roused to a confused sound of voices, to a vague realization of familiar figures round her, backed by a lurid glare, and begrimed demons from some seemingly nethermost pit in brass helmets . . . She believed that she cried out. She knew that voices called to her, reassuring, soothing, tender. She heard some one sobbing hysterically — felt gentle hands upon her.

Then she descended to a new nightmare of pain, and fought with a devil whose eyes were Gustav De Mille's eyes, and whose hands were about her throat. . . . She went down to the darkness crying Lola's name, at once appealingly and triumphantly.

She woke again in a darkened yet familiar room. A weight was upon her feet, which purred and stirred as she moved. Rose scents were hauntingly about her. In the gloom she detected Sally's familiar sniff as, on the other side of the bed, some one sobbed. She tried to turn her head. A voice that she knew to be

Irma's spoke to her, over choked sobs, from the darkness. Sally's broke across it — Sally's arm lifted her head. Something touched her lips and she drank and slept, dreamlessly.

Sally was still beside her when she roused again, many hours afterwards. A Sally less plump, it would seem, furrowed with anxiety, motherly, gentle — a Sally whose eyes brimmed with tears and whose rough hand pulled the silken eiderdown higher solicitously.

"Glory be to the Lord!" The voice was rough, the tone infinitely thankful. "She's come back!"

Binny grinned, irrepressibly. She made to free herself of the silken covering, and bit back a groan. The grin died. Her eyes sought Sally's.

"Then it wasn't a dream?" she whispered, in a curious little croaking voice she could not recognize as her own.

Sally regarded her grimly. "Not by a long chalk, it wasn't. . . . Lie still, dearie! . . ."

But the girl's eyes were wide now, brilliant with anxiety and question. "Sally! Am I . . . am I much hurt?"

"Not so as you'll notice it, honey — after a month or two!" Sally assured her comfortingly, and once more, in spite of herself, Binny gurgled into an irrepressible mirth.

"And I'm not dead! . . . The theatre . . . the others? Sally! *Sally!*" Horror of remembrance rushed upon her, blanching her face, sending her hands wildly in desperate seeking of comfort.

Sally's closed upon them. Sally's stony glance restrained the forward movement of a dim figure close to the door. "You're not dead, nor likely to be — not from this little dose. As to the theatre, it's as right as it ever was — except for its innards! If you're meaning by the others the folks who were there — well, they're here now, the whole bloomin' lot of them, an' me that's so bothered with one thing and another I don't know if I'm on me head or me heels. And the doctor wantin' to send a nurse in and me refusin' — as I'm sure you'd be wishin' me to, Miss Lola. Not to speak of the police, and all!"

"The police! . . . Sally! Tell me — they know — everything?"

"If you'll not be fashin' yourself, I'll answer. Lie still, then! It's all right, Mr.

Farrance; I reckon I know how to be dealin' with the lamb. . . . You can do all the talkin' you like when she's ready for it, which she isn't at the minute, havin' somethin' on her mind, and her senses not properly back!"

She patted Binny's hand soothingly. "It's all right, dearie!" she comforted. "Everything's all right! And everything's goin' on bein' all right—you can bet your life on that! As for *knowin'* . . . *every one* knows *everything,* dearie! Every one who matters, of course. The rest just know what they read in the papers — which ain't everything."

She wrinkled her nose, still pawing the girl's hand gently. "You've been lyin' here, half dead, close on three weeks. Which bein' so I took the liberty of handin' over that packet you left with me to Mr. Farrance — *with* the paper I found stuck inside your camisole the night of the fire — not bein' sure if you'd ever come round or not, and rememberin' how strict you were about what I was to do with the packet. If I've done wrong, I can't help it. You bein' so near dead we hardly knew if we'd keep you alive, I couldn't well do otherwise. Anyway, you've held a reception on your doorstep most days of the week, not

to speak of Mr. Farrance rampagin' like a tiger, and Miss Irma cryin' her eyes out, and Mr. Terry . . . But there! Talk about publicity! . . . And now, here's the doctor!"

Binny sighed, and closed her eyes. Opening them, fleetingly, she caught a glimpse, across a broad shoulder, of Dudley Farrance's face — and though wistfully unsure of the reality of his presence, yet she was warmed by a new sense of comfort.

There came a day when, lying still among her pillows, she spoke, abruptly, to the occupants of the room in general — they being Sally, Irma, and the cat — and Irma in particular.

"I want to see Dudley," she said, turning wide eyes from a bowl of violets at her side. "But I want to see Mr. Harkness — first. Alone."

When he came, she smiled at him gravely, stretching a thin hand towards him. Her eyes held his, searchingly, a little sad.

He took it, held it fast between his own. He spoke first: "Binny Clay!" he whispered huskily. "Binny Clay! . . . She must have named you after me! . . . "

Binny's eyes lightened, glowed. "Then — you guessed, after all?"

"I couldn't help it. There have been inquiries, of course. And that letter you left with Sally; a lot of it had to become public."

"But — I haven't hurt you?" Binny's fingers clung. She raised herself on her pillows. "No one could know you — that Benjamin Clay is you?"

Harkness shook his head. "No. No one knows that. You're a sport — kid!"

She dropped back, smiling. "And we're friends?"

Harkness looked down into the wide eyes — at the firm little hand. His lips twisted oddly. "How otherwise? The best ever — and for always. We'll have a lot to talk about — *Binny* — when you're better. Just you and I."

Binny smiled. Then her eyes darkened. "Dudley?" Her lip quivered for a moment. "He knows? About — the way I cheated, I mean?"

Harkness met her glance gravely. "We all know . . . Dudley is waiting. He has been waiting — waiting — ever since that awful night. I'll send him to you now."

She opened her lips; closed them again. Her eyes clung to his, wistful, questioning. Her face was faintly touched with pink.

"Does he *want* to come?" she said, and Harkness made a little gesture.

"Dudley Farrance," he said, very quietly, "loves — *you!*"

As he reached the door, she checked him. "Gustav?" Her face was once more white with the horror of remembrance. "Tell me . . . ?"

Harkness looked at her, and away. He hesitated, cleared his throat. Then: "He was mad!" he said. "He was mad — mad with fright. He could not have seen the stairs for the smoke . . . he pitched headlong down them. He was dead when they picked him up . . . "

She did not know that Farrance was in the room until he touched her. Then with a little cry she turned to him, reached out her arms. But when he would have caught her close in his, she held him back.

"You know?" she said. "You *know?*" — as if pitifully seeking to be sure.

For answer Farrance gathered her up and

held her, so tightly that she fought for breath, his cheek against hers.

"I know!" he told her. "And I know that I love you! That is all that really matters, heart of mine! That, and being, for always, together."

From beyond the closed door there came the rising note of Sally's voice, cheerfully scolding.

"Hot-water bottles . . . bandages . . . breakfast in the middle of the night and the day too! These dratted nurses! Thank the good Lord, I stood out for only one — me havin' all the work of the house to do in the day! I'd be in me grave by now if I hadn't — and Miss Lola too, most like. *Work!* Bless your heart! I've done nothing but work all me life, and I'll go *on* working all me life . . . quit your blarney, Mr. Terry, and not be makin' quite so much noise . . . What's that? When'll Miss Lola be up and fit for the theatre again? . . . G — rrh! Drat the theatre, say I! I've had about enough of it. Seems to me I've lost all heart for it, lately . . . "

In Farrance's arms Binny shivered, stirred, ceased to smile. She drew a little away from him, soft palms against his breast. "So have

I!" she whispered. "Oh — my dear! I'm so tired of pretending! I just want to live — and to be loved!"

Sally, opening the door at that juncture, gently shut it again.

"Which, by the same token, as Mr. Terry would say," she announced to the white cat, "is divilish bad luck for Mr. Van Bevan!"

THE END

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